

A THORN IN THE FLESH

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"COMETH UP AS A FLOWER,"
ETC. ETC.

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CHAPTER I

MISS CRISP read aloud out of a book that she was perusing the following passage : " C'est un mal bien dangereux que celui d'être sujet à se marier ; j'aimerais mieux boire ! " Mrs. Henley's answer was a mere " Humph. " She was also reading.

" I dare say that you have not the slightest idea who wrote that ? " pursued Miss Crisp.

" Not the slightest. " The tone conveyed that the speaker had no very ardent wish to have her ignorance on the subject in question enlightened.

" Do not you think that it is admirably said ? "

The other laid down her herbalist's catalogue with what was not exactly a bang, but rather a protest against a futile interruption, on the table beside her. " No I do not. Personally though I have no great opinion of the institution I had rather marry any number of times than take to drink. "

Miss Crisp laughed a little ; but her eyes reverted lovingly to her book. " Un mal bien dangereux ! " she repeated almost reverently—" how excellently said ; but when did she ever say anything that was not excellent ? " To this ejaculation the other lady made no sort of response, partly because she really did not in the least care to know who the superlative *She* in question was, and partly because she knew that her companion meant her to ask. But Miss Crisp was not to be baffled. She was determined to supply the undesired information. " Reading Mme.

de Sévigné makes me wonder why one ever reads anyone else ! " she said.

Her friend made no answer. During the ten years that they had lived together, she had consistently ignored all such exhibitions of literary enthusiasm on Miss Crisp's part. She had not succeeded in quelling them ; but neither had she grown weary of trying to do so. Yet she had perhaps even—such is the perversity of human nature—stimulated their production. It amused Judith Crisp to see her prosaic housemate writhing under some stave of an old poet, or epigram culled from an eighteenth-century humorist.

" She is a malicious old toad ! " Mrs. Henley's daughter, Susannah, said on one of these occasions, apropos of the reciter, to the old toad's niece, Parthenope Bethell, with that reverence for grey hairs so characteristic of the age—" she does it on purpose, I am sure, and how poor mother does hate it ! Personally I cannot think why she should mind, as one need never listen."

" One would lose a great deal if one did not," retorted Parthenope, with as distinct a protest against the sentiment uttered as a very small and piano voice would allow ; " I always think it is a real treat to hear Aunt Judith repeat poetry ; her enunciation is so distinct and her literary taste so unerring. I only wish that I could persuade her to treat us to it oftener."

" Well, I will do her the justice to say that it is a visitation which she does not often inflict upon us," rejoined the other with a chuckle. " In fact, I may say never, except when she wants to rile mother ; and in *that* she is brilliantly successful ! "

The speaker went off still laughing, to put her chickens to bed, and Parthenope remained sitting on that bench in the little sunk garden where the colloquy had taken place.

She did not care for chickens, except lying on their backs in a dish ; and not very much even then, as the pleasures of the table did not greatly appeal to her. In the sunk

garden her aunt, who was not looking for her, presently found her.

"So you are here, are you? I did not know that you were back?"

"Yes," replied the junior slowly—"I am back. I did not stay very long, because I felt that I could not be much comfort to him—to them, I mean!"

"Then you were perfectly right to come away," replied the aunt with decision; "if you are ever in doubt as to whether people do or do not desire your company, it is always safer to decide that they do not!"

It is uncertain whether the younger woman was in a position to lay to heart the excellent counsel thus offered her. A preoccupation which made the corners of her mouth droop probably deafened her to it. "The Medical Board has again refused to pass Willy," she said in an even more minor key than usual, "of course his parents are delighted; but *he!* . . ." She paused expressively—then added with a sort of chastened briskness—"I reminded him that

'They also serve, who only stand and wait.'

"And that bucked him up a bit?" rejoined the elder lady in a cheerful interrogation out of which she tried to keep any trace of irony. Her niece glanced at her sideways with a faint misgiving; but there was no indication of satire in the good ugly shrewd profile beside her;—*beside her*, for Miss Crisp had sat down on the bench too; not because she wished it, but because an invitatory contraction of her own draperies on the girl's part showed that it was expected of her.

"I do not think that anything could have bucked him up to-day," Parthenope answered mournfully—"he was so absolutely flattened; after having had all his teeth pulled out as they told him last time that he ought to do, he felt confident that there would be no further difficulty; but now they find that his eyes are wrong—astigmatic!"

"Astigmatic?" repeated Miss Crisp, as if she had never

heard the word before, which could not have been the case.

It sounded stupid ; but in point of fact she was breathing an inward prayer that her niece was not going to begin to cry, coupled with a wonder—experienced not for the first time—that she should not only feel but display so tearfully poignant an interest in ugly uninteresting Willy Steele, who, to do him justice, had never, to Judith Crisp's knowledge, done anything to encourage her.

"His mother might have had the good taste to disguise her exultation a little at what she knew perfectly well was so far from being a matter of congratulation to him, poor fellow !" continued the unconscious subject of Miss Crisp's inward animadversions ; in a tone where exasperation began to hold its own against lamentation. "He said to me that he did not know how he should get through the evening with her and his sisters, unless he could hit upon some way to gag them !"

"Poor devil ! Why did not you ask him to come and dine here ?"

"I did, but he said that he would far, *far* rather not !"

At that an inevitable tremor of threatened laughter twitched the corners of Miss Crisp's mouth. "I do, like a person who knows his own mind !"

CHAPTER II

"I HEAR," said Miss Crisp next morning, addressing Susannah Henley, "that you told Parthenope I was a spiteful old toad."

It would have been difficult for the girl to rebut the accusation, since the truth-compelling sun was shining strongly on her "lint white" head and "milk white" face; and she did not attempt to do so. "Parthenope ought not to have repeated it!" she replied. There was not much of apology in her tone; and still less of irritation against the offender. Everyone knew that Parthenope *repeated*! If one forgot it, one was a fool, and deserved to suffer for it; and she knew that her own relation to the elder woman was too solid to be shaken by such a trifle.

"It was under great provocation!" rejoined Parthenope's aunt in quick partisanship. "I was speaking in not at all a nice tone of the Steele family; and you know how hypersensitive she is about them."

"I do not see many points in them myself!" Susannah said dispassionately; as one willing to own that the inability to see points in the Steele family might be due to a defect in her own vision—"but I am sorry for Willy; though—judging from the way in which Parthe tells me he is taking it—I shall certainly not condole with him."

"*Never* condole with people upon mortifications!" said the other trenchantly, "griefs—yes—mortifications, no!"

"That is not a bad distinction!" answered Susannah, in a tone of playful patronage; "and I believe it is quite true; well, I must be off."

"Are you going to walk?"

"Yes, my bicycle has gone and punctured itself, more

shame to it, but it is no hardship walking through the wood. I shall be there in forty minutes."

She was off as she spoke in her Red Cross uniform, stepping out blithely towards the Private Hospital for Wounded Soldiers, where, three days a week, she spent half a dozen hours in the humdrum employment of mending sheets, making bed jackets, etc. The work-room was not the most exciting branch of hospital industry, and Parthenope expressed a gentle contempt for her friend's unpretentious occupation; and threw herself into the laundry, where she stood over a wash-tub for two and a half days; and then came home and took to her bed. Miss Crisp looked after her late companion till the last vestige of cloak and pale, bright hair had vanished. Their parting had been beneath the verandahed porch of the pretty villa, over which ten years' growth of roses was ramping. There were not actual roses yet; but what a crop of buds!

"And to think that when we came there was not a vestige of a leaf!" Judith said to herself, for the many thousandth time, as her eyes took in the infinite promise of beauty that in a week or two would embalm the gale! Her mental eye ran at the same time over the decade that had so glorified her habitation. There had been roses in that too; roses, yes; but also thorns!

When first the joint household had planted itself in the pretty villa on its heathery firry plateau within a few miles of a great camp, and above a little nestling old town, it had had scarcely any neighbours save the straight stems of the pines. Now houses—villas like itself—swarmed round it; houses stocked chiefly with retired soldiers and their belongings. It was a neighbourly place where everybody was about as well off as everybody else; and where people ran in with bare heads in the morning, and borrowed step-ladders and screw-drivers; and exchanged cuttings, and settings of eggs; and whose dogs fought or lured each other into illicit poaching excursions into the still surviving neighbouring woods. Mrs. Henley's Taffy

had never recovered wholly from an encounter caused by an attachment to the same charming object with the Steele bulldog ; at least, to speak more accurately, his ear, on which that retentive animal had fastened for a quarter of an hour, never had. It had lost its original graceful hang ; and was for ever dissimilar from its uninjured fellow. And the Steeles had not been nice about it. Not once had they come to enquire. And they lived so extremely near that there was positively no excuse for them.

The Steeles had the negative merit indeed of not being too sociable. They never borrowed and they never ran in, and they never wished to call people prematurely by their Christian names ! The only fault that could be found with them as neighbours was that they had no particular points. They were more numerous than it has of late years been the fashion to be. Half a dozen sons dispersed over the globe's face ; married daughters ; three single ones living at home, and Willy ! In fact, a little of everything. Mr. Steele had spent many years in the Indian Civil Service ; and to judge by his melancholy countenance, must have lost heart and liver in that sultry clime. Mrs. Steele was melancholy too, though for all her acquaintances knew to the contrary, her heart and liver were in their right places. A dim and unsubstantial legend of her having had a vaguely gallant past floated mist-like about her. It originated probably in a desire to account for her gloom ; but whether repentance for her visionary misdeeds or regret that they were past had furrowed lines in her brow, had never been satisfactorily decided. Perhaps it was a kinship in low-tonedness that attracted Parthenope Bethell to them. If otherwise, why was she, "despite their absence of reciprocity," always of late running in to them ? Apropos, is not that her parasol which is even now flitting rosilily through the Steeles' gate ?

The sight was more vexatious than one to which she was so well accustomed ought to have been to Miss Bethell's

aunt ; but the hour was so early—ten o'clock had just struck !—and the visit must be so unwelcome to a family who had anything to do ; that being in her way a philosopher, Miss Crisp averted her eyes and turned her steps toward the garden.

“ If you do not like a thing and cannot prevent it, try not to see it ! ” was one of the axioms for which she found most use in her daily walk through life. In the garden she found, as she knew that she should do, her partner in the establishment, Mrs. Henley.

As she also knew that she should do, she found that lady vituperating her gardener in terms so familiar to him as to have become almost melodious in his ears.

“ Jackson, you are the greatest fool that God ever put breath into ! ”

“ Yes, Miss.”

Jackson always acquiesced in the amenities addressed to him ; nor could he ever—despite numberless remonstrances—be dissuaded from qualifying his employer as “ Miss,” despite the gross unsuitability of the title to so old-established and full-blown a matron. There was some evidence of the fact that Mrs. Henley had been a good-looking woman ; though, as she had come to the neighbourhood only ten years ago, it was not really well authenticated.

Probability—though Susannah's admirers could never be brought to admit it—pointed to the fact that her hair must once have resembled her daughter's ; but time had bleached the shine out of it ; and mixed it freely and unbecomingly with white. Blond hair is not one of the things that knows how to grow old gracefully. She had once, conjecturally, been a fine figure of a woman ; but at present—particularly in her garden overall—was a good deal spread ; a circumstance which gave her not the least concern any more than the fact that in her best evening clothes, and with her diamond crescent forced into her coiffure by a dominant daughter—she was still tolerably handsome—afforded her the smallest pleasure. She was

certainly better favoured and younger by ten years than Judith. As she heard the latter's step on the gravel, she turned towards her.

"Where is Parthe?"

"Do you want her?"

"She promised to help me with these petunias"—indicating a box of seedlings at her feet—"of course some one must stand over him while he is pricking them out!" Mrs. Henley made this announcement of perfect distrust of her gardener in a matter-of-fact unlowered voice; and so strong is the force of habit that Jackson's lips half framed the accustomed "Yes, Miss," but, apparently bethinking himself that the remark was not addressed to him, and therefore did not demand an answer, he contented himself with an assenting gesture of his meek head. His mistress added with a detached air: "One never can depend upon Parthe!"

A slight championing pink rose to Miss Crisp's cheek, as it had never all through all these years lost the habit of doing, under any arraignment of her niece; however cordial may have been her inward agreement with the criticism uttered or implied.

"It was not a very important engagement to forget," she answered with some tartness. And then she added a remark about the petunias. They were both so used to sparring that it never left much mark.

CHAPTER III

THE wonder was that the Coalition had answered as well as it had ; considering how very little the constituent members of it had in common ; and how small was their acquaintance when they had embarked upon it. Both had eagerly assured their surprised friends that it was no question of a foolish female infatuation that had made them link their lives together ; but a purely commercial calculation, that two absurdly inadequate incomes might, by junction, be welded into one almost adequate one. Both were still rather addicted to letting new acquaintances know that they were not really at all fond of one another ! Ten years ago the death of her husband and the smallness of the pension that a grateful country paid her in compensation for his loss, had left Mrs. Henley saddled with an inconveniently hungry Susannah of twelve years ; and at about the same time Miss Crisp found herself facing the future with a lachrymose Parthenope of thirteen, whom, out of sheer compassion, she had snatched out of a large rough-and-tumble out-at-elbows family, who mimicked her piping voice, and hustled her sore, to share her exiguous income.

Often in after years Judith Crisp had asked herself *why* she had adopted Parthenope ? Was it because she whined when her sisters cuffed her ? Was it because the knitting-pin proportions of her legs and arms seemed to give the idea that her family's Lacedemonian methods might push and box her into a decline ? Never had Parthenope's rescuer been able to answer these questions to her own satisfaction ; and, after all, at this time of day, of what use was it to put them ? It had always been one of Miss Crisp's theories that it is for our good actions, not

our crimes, that we are mostly punished in this world ; so, in this solution of her puzzle, she had for several years acquiesced. After all, if she had *not* adopted Parthenope she would never have joined housekeeping with Mrs. Henley ; and would probably never have known Susannah—dear Susannah who called her a “spiteful old toad,” and to disguise her infinite preference for whom over her own young kinswoman was one of the toughest problems of her daily life.

To conceal from the blood relation the scandalous way in which the balance dipped towards the side of the alien was indeed a stiff task ; and one which she could never feel confident of having successfully pulled off. At the same time to keep Parthenope’s pennon flying in the eyes of all their acquaintances ; to be ready at any moment to parry Mrs. Henley’s frequent thrusts at her ; and finally to suppress without grossly snubbing the girl’s tiresomely monopolising affection for herself, were labours that made Miss Crisp often lay a very tired head upon her nightly pillow. On these occasions she sometimes said to herself with a groan : “I am not a rich woman ; but I would give two-thirds of my income that Parthenope was not so fond of me !”

On the present occasion, her defence of her niece had scarcely passed her lips when the need for defence was removed by the appearance of the defaulter, coming with the slack gait that spoke of a low vitality, under the long rose-pergola, that was now a wonder of buds almost alike for the moment in their close green sheaths, but just beginning to hint into what a variety of cream and orange, rose and flame they were ready to break.

“Here is Parthenope !” her aunt said, as she caught sight of the girl, and with a small pinch of triumph in her voice : “you see that she had not forgotten !”

But in this Miss Crisp was mistaken. Parthenope’s presence was due—not to the horticultural obligation, of which she was perfectly oblivious, but to curiosity as to the contents of an orange envelope which she held in her

hand, and tendered to Mrs. Henley. "It is 'Answer paid,'" she said; "I met the boy; he is waiting."

Mrs. Henley took the missive with a muffled growl at the interruption; tore it open, read it impatiently, and tossed it to Judith, who in turn perused it. "May I come to tea to-day, without Nurse?—JACK."

"I have not got a pencil; will you answer it for me?" Mrs. Henley addressed her request to her elder friend; ignoring, whether purposely or not, the inquisitiveness divined in the younger.

Probably she was innocent of any malevolent intention; all the evil passions of which her nature was capable being for the moment focused upon her gardener; who was at the moment eyeing with remorse and alarm a choice little herbaceous treasure recently presented to and carefully planted a day or two ago by his employer's own hands; and which, during the two minutes that her restraining eye had been averted from him, he had mistaken for a weed and uprooted.

"Jackson, you idiot! Do you see what you have done?"

"Yes, Miss!"

Parthenope had sidled up to her aunt; and, laying a pretty hand, that looked as if it never did much, upon her shoulder glanced over it at the wire.

"May I see? Is it anything interesting?" As she read a tinge of added sadness—Parthenope was always more or less sad—stole over her face. "I fancy it is the first time he has been allowed out without his nurse, and"—with a half-suppressed sigh—"his first impulse is to hurry here!"

"There is nothing very odd in that!" replied Miss Crisp, unobtrusively removing herself from under her niece's touch—"we are about his oldest friends; the Camerons were the very first people to call upon us, when we settled here; were not they, Harriet?"

But Harriet was too wrathfully occupied in trying to repair the ruin wrought on her latest treasure to pay any heed to the appeal. "Give it to me!" she was saying

in an awful voice, and with her right hand extended to take the already flabby-looking plant from its destroyer's hold ; " I will put it back myself ; but it is probably no use ; you have ingeniously managed to cut the root in two, with that trowel which there was not the slightest necessity for you to use ! "

" Yes, Miss ! "

Parthenope, happily unaware of the gently withdrawing movement on her senior's part, followed her, and said dreamily :

" I wonder what that magnetic power of Susannah's consists in ? "

" She would be very much surprised to hear that she had it ! " answered the person addressed, with a mild dryness.

" Perhaps that is why she has it, " rejoined the girl, throwing up her chin and staring meditatively at the little plummy cloudlets that made insignificant exceptions to the enormous monotony of azure above her head.

Her aunt had not the smallest desire to pursue the speculation. " Well, " she asked, turning to her coadjutor, " what am I to say ? Is Jack to come ? "

" What a question ! " returned the other ; her attention at last successfully distracted from her *Souffre Douleur*— " of course he is, and tell him that I am delighted that he is coming without ' Nurse ' ! "

" She will probably read it to him ! "

" I do not care if she does ; it will be very good for her ! And tell him that we will all look after him, and cut his bread and butter for him ! "

" If I say all that it will run up to half a crown ! "

CHAPTER IV

"You did not pay the Steeles a long visit?" Miss Crisp said a little later to her niece in a tone of approbation—"I think you were right; people are not fond of being raided in the forenoon! I hate it myself!"

"I came away," replied Parthenope in a very sad voice, "because I found that I could not give any comfort! I had hoped that I might, but the wound is too raw yet!"

"Whose wound? *What* wound?"

The girl looked at her senior with subdued reproach: "Have you forgotten the Medical Board?"

"Oh, of course! How stupid of me! Poor Willy!"

"None of his people understand him; his mother told him that she had rather have one live son than six dead heroes! Imagine how he winced!"

"Even if she thought so, she had no business to say so!" retorted Judith, a little red of offended patriotism flushing her elderly cheek.

"Even Laura, who is supposed to be the one who enters most into his feelings, hurt him dreadfully by saying that if anyone, in *her* hearing, called him a slacker, she would give him or her a piece of her mind."

The elder woman could not help a small strangled laugh, at this exquisite specimen of sisterly tact.

"That was certainly not a very judicious form of consolation." A moment later, she added with compunctious good-nature—"if his family are so much too much for him, why did not you bring him with you?"

"I did not see him. He had locked himself into his room

Miss Crisp's grey eyebrows went up. "When he saw you coming?"

A look of pained surprise crossed Parthenope's small regular features. "Oh, I do not think that he would do that! *I* never rub him the wrong way! Of course *they* do at every turn! I told Laura of his saying to me that he wished he had been born a foundling!"

There was a slight pause, spent by the senior in debating with herself whether it was worth while remarking what a pestilent habit was that of repeating, and deciding that it was not, since it would certainly not result in her niece's abandonment of the practice; and would probably produce a deluge of tears. She observed instead:

"If he would come to tea, it might tonic him up to meet Jack Cameron and see how cheerfully he bears his trials!"

"It would make him far worse!" retorted the girl with animated conviction—"he is so dreadfully envious of his having been wounded!"

There was enough of the fighting spirit in Judith Crisp's female heart for her to be able to enter more than she was by any means able always to do, into the mental sufferings of the young man in question, and she replied quite heartily: "I do not wonder . . . it *is* bad luck! and after having had all his teeth out too!"

"Oh, he does not give his teeth a thought!" cried Parthenope in indignant partisanship—"but he can't help seeing how terribly unjustly things are divided!"

"Of course they are," rejoined the other impatiently, exasperated, as so often before, by the lugubrious platitude—"what is the good of saying so?" Then, faintly remorseful at her own outbreak, she began to recite, half under her breath, as if to soothe her own spirit:

"If every good man that now pines with Want
Had but a liberal and besecming share——"

"Oh, do go on!" interrupted her niece in a voice of ecstatic appreciation—"what noble lines! and how wonderfully you repeat them!"

But instead of stimulating the flow of Miss Crisp's poetic output, Parthenope's cry of admiration had the

effect of instantly stemming it. She stopped short, and a voice, which no one could accuse of expressing admiration, here made itself heard—the voice of Mrs. Henley, who, issuing from the hall door, joined the two persons sitting on the verandah, where two large tubs of late flowering tulips made a parti-coloured gaiety.

“Oh! you are spouting poetry! I will come back when you have done. I only wanted to give the ivy a drop of water!” She glanced from the water-can in her hand to the climbing dark greenness which she had been sedulously training up inside the verandah, and whisked off hurriedly as she spoke.

Judith laughed a little.

“How she hates poetry,” sighed Parthenope in a tone of the profoundest compassion. “Poor thing! What a deprivation, if she did but know it!”

“I am not so sure of that,” retorted her aunt perversely; and, rebutting with vigour her niece’s timidly ardent suggestion that she should continue her Miltonic citation, “I sometimes feel as if I too hated poetry,” she ended with a dry laugh.

Her companion was too much used to such *volle faces* on the part of her senior, and to snubbing receptions of her flat heroics, to resent them. She only said pensively:

“Susannah certainly does, and yet,” with an intonation of wonder; “she is made to inspire it!”

“Is she? I have not yet detected Jack Cameron in writing a sonnet to her eyebrow!”

The other smiled derisively. “Of course he is quite incapable of it; but she would not read it if he did.”

Her aunt looked at the girl a little startled. “Why do you say so?”

The other shrugged her slim shoulders. “With them it is a case of ‘L’un qui baise et l’autre qui ne tend pas la joue!’”

Miss Crisp received this announcement in surprised silence. She had always felt her own protégée to be so morbidly self-absorbed as not to have time or inclination

for insight into the motives or wishes of those around her.

"Other people feel without inspiring," continued Miss Bethell, with a sort of melancholy shrewdness—"Susannah inspires without feeling."

Her aunt glanced at her with a renewal of surprise—a surprise that was not pleasant. It was but too obvious to which category was the implication that she herself belonged—that of those who feel without inspiring! Miss Crisp had long and mortifiedly been aware of this fact since from the age of fifteen "Parthe" had continually been "feeling," but there was no authentic instance of her having ever inspired. That she was herself aware of the crushing truth that despite her neat nose, her well-set hair and her little piping voice, she did not "come off" was news to her companion; and since she was a good-hearted woman, a real compassion underlay the slight jeer contained in her next speech: "You are quite epigrammatic this morning."

The other's answer was to lean back in her garden chair with fingers lightly touching each other; as her elbows rested on the wicker arms; and gaze with a seer-like intensity at the gentians making pools of blue on the rock garden on the other side of the drive.

"Susannah never really cares for people—not for anybody—she likes *things* much better—animals, plants—golf clubs; do you remember before she grew up how devoted she was to those stupid guinea pigs that she brushed three times a day? Mrs. Henley always said that Susannah liked them much better than she did *her*; and Susannah never denied it."

Miss Crisp threw back her head and laughed almost loudly. "Could parental jealousy go further than to resent attentions to a guinea pig?" she asked derisively. But though she laughed, there was something not unlike an ache behind her mirth. Was not there a grain of truth in the accusation that Susannah *did not care for people—for anybody*? Behind her universal gay kindness was there any indication of a heart that could throb and bleed?

Susannah would do anything for anybody—do it gladly and graciously, even if it involved trouble and annoyance to herself, but did she *love* anybody? Did she love her mother, whose gruff attempts to disguise her overweening pride in her daughter deceived no one? Did she love Judith Crisp herself, who was always so guiltily conscious of her own immense preference for the delightful alien over her own flesh and blood? Did she love Jack Cameron, even after he had had his jaw fractured and his elbow splintered? To none of these questions could Miss Crisp give an unhesitating “yes.”

CHAPTER V

"Why do not you answer me?" asked Mrs. Henley sharply, later on the same day. "I should have thought it quite impossible that you did not *hear* me. Shall we have tea indoors or out of doors?"

The sweet civility of Mrs. Henley's daughter was certainly not derived from her mother; and the acquaintances of that lady, who had known her only in her widowed state, had often been obliged to construct a male Henley of surpassing courtesy, to account for the discrepancy. Mrs. Henley herself never alluded to the departed; and invariably tried to dissuade anyone whom she suspected of a matrimonial intention; yet somebody had told somebody that somebody else had said that Mrs. Henley's marriage had been a happy one; and that she had quite respectably regretted her late partner. However, there could be no doubt that she did extremely well without him.

"Though you speak loudly you are not always very distinct," retorted Miss Crisp with not much superior suavity, adding as a modifying afterthought—"I am undoubtedly rather deaf."

"What I want to know"—speaking with a rather exasperated distinctness, "is whether we are to have tea out of doors or indoors?"

"Susannah would like it best out of doors."

"It is no question of Susannah, it is what Jack would like best."

"Jack would like whatever Susannah likes!"

The crossness left Mrs. Henley's face, as it always did under any tribute to her daughter. That no man when brought into relationship with Susannah should keep his head was a fixed article of her parent's creed, but a not

less essential one was that Susannah should keep hers ! Never had anyone mooted the question of Miss Henley's espousing any of her horde of admirers without obtaining from the girl's mother the unvarying answer : " She is not quite such a fool as that ! She knows when she is well off ! " The recipient of this scornful response, and of many similar fliers at the Holy Ordinance of Matrimony had often been tempted to ask its utterer how it had come about that she herself had been caught in so baleful a web ? and what the deceased Henley had done to lend such an edge to his widow's tongue when speaking of the tie that had united them ? But no one had ever done so. On the present occasion, she answered with a good-humoured scoff.

" Pooh ! He is not quite such a characterless milksop as to have no opinion of his own ! "

" Susannah or not, I am sure that he would rather have it out of doors. "

" Well, then out of doors let it be, " acquiesced Mrs. Henley with a clearing brow, " and under the cherry trees—they really are a sight—tell Sarah to put the table under the cherry trees ! Dear old boy, I shall be very glad to see him ; but "—with a slight cloud reappearing on her brow—" I wonder does he eat or drink anything odd—anything that we have not got in the house ? "

" I should think not ! What odd things could he want to eat or drink at afternoon tea ? "

" Oh, I do not know—Benger—sort of messes ! " answered the matron, who, never in her life having had a day's illness, suffered from an ignorance touched with contempt for all artificial aids to convalescence. On the present occasion the contempt was modified by a sincere desire not to be found lacking in any detail of hospitality that might look like want of welcome to the expected hero.

" We have got Benger, " returned Miss Crisp, rather shortly ; with the indignation of a consciously good house-keeper at being suspected of a deficiency in any branch of her " commissariat "—" but I am sure that he would not look at it. "

"And what will he sit upon?" continued Mrs. Henley, still with an anxious furrow on her forehead. "Will he need any particular kind of chair? Ought we to have a sofa wheeled out? I might get that ass Jackson to wheel out a sofa. I am sure that we might just as well utilise him in that way for all the good he does in the garden!"

"You will make an enemy for life of the boy if you treat him as an invalid, and what should he want with a sofa when his legs are as good as yours?"

Foiled in her hospitable intentions, Mrs. Henley turned away observing, but without much temper, and merely as if stating a detached fact, addressed to the ambient air that whatever she suggested Judith was sure to oppose; and the direction which her steps had taken was presently evidenced by the sound of the "Look 'ere, Miss!" which was Jackson's invariable conventional opening in the case of his employer.

"Why, Susannah is driving him," cried Miss Crisp a couple of hours later, when the expected motor at length turned in at the prematurely opened gates; gates which Taffy, with an unholy prescience, had long been watching to effect a forbidden exit and trot off upon a series of prohibited calls.

"Well, you would not expect him to be driving himself with a bullet in his elbow!" replied Mrs. Henley; and then they both hurried across the gravel drive to greet the guest.

"Was not it valiant of him to put his life in my hands?" cried the girl, breaking tactfully with her cheerful question into the shower of enquiries, congratulations and welcomes with which her seniors were perhaps rather overloading the young man—"he has been giving me a lift; he came to fetch me at the hospital. Wasn't it good of him?"

"It was a mercy that I was able to get there in time," put in the young man in hasty stemming of the flood of welcomes and offers of help with which the two elder women were deluging him, as he held out to them a left hand, which he tried to make look like a right one. "She

had no business to tramp all that long way—two miles of it if a yard—in the sun. It was quite enough to give her a sunstroke ! ”

The utterer of this pungent remonstrance was so young, and his tone at once so burningly indignant and so dogmatic as he cast a most unnecessarily anxious eye upon the vigorously blooming creature beside him, that they all broke into a laugh. His solicitude for the faultlessly healthy Susannah never failed to amuse her family.

“ I have promised always in future to wear a pith helmet ! ” cried she joyously, laying a soothing hand on the youth’s shoulder ; taking care that it was the sound one.

And then they all crossed the drive, and betook themselves to the cherry trees and the teacups. Mrs. Henley had not exaggerated the beauty of her trees—a barren beauty since they were double ones—but they were, as she had said, “ *A sight.* ” Their crowded whiteness made a dazzle above the heads of the group beneath them ; but yet, like George Herbert’s rose, there were already indications that they “ must die.” Every weak little breeze that got up only to lie down again, sent a storm of fragile blossoms floating about the shoulders of guest and hosts. A light snow surrounded the cakes and whitened the kettle.

“ Are you quite sure that you wouldn’t like something else instead of tea ? ” enquired Mrs. Henley, sitting with the teapot suspended in mid-air, and despite her friend Judith’s warning, throwing a note of solicitude into her offer.

“ A whisky and soda ? ” replied he, wilfully misunderstanding her, “ no thanks, I had rather have tea.”

“ I did not mean whisky and soda,” returned the matron, hanging on rather tactlessly to her *idée fixe*. “ I meant—Benger.”

Again Susannah came to the rescue. “ Nurse Jones has given him carte blanche to over-eat and over-drink himself as much as he pleases while her eye is off him.”

“ It is so nice to get you without her,” pursued Susannah’s

mother—"but I suppose that as long as your elbow needs daily dressing you cannot get permanently rid of her."

"He does not want to get rid of her," broke in the girl with laughing emphasis—noting the rising exasperation in the young man's eye; at this doubly unfortunate observation; doubly unfortunate since he hated any allusion to his wounds; and held his nurse in the highest and most chivalrous estimation—"he loves her!"

CHAPTER VI

"DOES she do it on purpose?" enquired Cameron half an hour later, still with an accent of latent exasperation, as Susannah and he stood by the chicken pens, whither she had borne him off.

It might have seemed a transparent ruse to secure a tête-à-tête with an admirer; but in point of fact her anxiety as to a new brood of Croad Langshang chickens was quite as genuine as her desire that her visitor should have nothing to ruffle him or mar the pleasure of his first independent visit since his release from the luxurious private London hospital where princesses had petted him, and smart ladies had plied him with questions as to his eagerness to return to the trenches.

It had been on Miss Henley's mind all day that her early pre-hospital visit to the chicken yard had disclosed a tragedy; the death by pressure of the large maternal foot of one of the downy infants who had left the sheltering egg only two days previously. It made her answer her swain's pettish question rather absently: "I do not think so"; then, reverting to her own preoccupation, she added: "That's the worst of these large breeds; they are so clumsy! Would not you think that if you heard your offspring give an agonised death-squeak, you would look to see what was happening?"

Cameron did not answer; and she, raising herself from the stooping position which the insinuating of food under the coop made necessary, met with her innocently enquiring eyes his gloomy and upbraiding look.

At once she set herself to repair her mistake. "You were asking me whether mother does it on purpose when she rubs you up the wrong way, by enquiring after your

bullet holes and shrapnels ? No, I am sure that she doesn't. She thinks that she is making herself very agreeable."

"I wish to goodness that you would undeceive her."

"Oh, I do not think I could do that. It would hurt her feelings dreadfully, and she is a good old sort, though the fairies that attended her christening didn't perhaps include tact in their gifts to her."

There was such a large airy benevolence in her tone that Jack looked at her with a sort of discomfort tempering the intensity of his admiration.

"One would never think that she was your mother to hear you talk of her."

"I have no reason for supposing that she is not."

He could not help laughing a little, but at once relapsed into his—to her—ridiculous gravity.

"It passes my understanding how she can allow you to run such risks."

"Bless her old heart ! Do you suppose that I asked her leave ? And when you talk of risks"—a friendly derision had crept into her tone ; but seeing him wince a little under it, she added : "Come now, we will strike a bargain !" laying as she spoke her shapely capable hand on his coat sleeve, and speaking coaxingly yet without coquetry : "You will promise to abandon the idea of my being a confirmed invalid, and I will promise always for the future to wear a pith helmet, *even indoors*. No ! don't look hurt, you really must not be so prickly."

An hour later the invalid had departed, soothed and smiling ; in charity even with Mrs. Henley, though her latest remark to him was an enquiry screamed out and not quite drowned by the throb of the departing engine, as to whether any more splinters of bone had come out at his elbow ? Happily he didn't need to, and certainly did not answer.

"Here you are !" cried Susannah cheerfully, finding Parthenope cast in a desponding attitude on the rustic seat in the little sunk garden to which she herself had run down to fill the terra-cotta bird-bath that stood there.

"What has become of you all the afternoon? Why were not you at tea?"

"Did anyone miss me? Did anyone ask for me?" There was a sort of morbid anxiety in the tone of the question; and the limp, half-reclining figure raised itself into as upright a position as anything so willowy ever did.

The other girl hesitated for a second. There was not the smallest doubt that not a thought of Parthenope had crossed the brain of any one of the revellers under the cherry trees—but it seemed brutal to say so.

"In point of fact," she answered lightly, "we were all too much occupied in spoiling Jack to think of anything else. We really must be careful or we shall make him quite unbearable."

"I felt sure that I should not be missed, when I saw how completely absorbed in him you all were, when he got out of the car. I saw you lay your hand on his arm."

"Well, why shouldn't I? It was the sound one!"

A spot of dull colour showed itself in each of Parthenope's cheeks ere she spoke again.

"Knowing his feelings for you, do you think that it is quite kind to him? You have no temperament yourself, but you must be aware that other people are not so fortunate."

For a second Susannah stared at her companion as if not comprehending, then she too brought out a pink flag. "That is rather a nasty idea, isn't it?" she said, then turned away to the terra-cotta vase that stood on the edge of a tiny wood, backed by bushes of broom and yellow lupin.

"If you'll believe it," she cried in a different tone, putting her finger-tips into the basin, "Jackson has never refilled it once to-day. 'Jackson, you *ass*, why have you never given those unfortunate birds a drop of water since yesterday morning?'" There was so masterly a reproduction of her mother's tone and words in this last sentence that anyone with a keener sense of the ridiculous than Miss Bethell would have laughed—but it seemed no difficulty

to her to preserve her mournful gravity, and Susannah went off giggling—obliged to be admirer of her own performance—to fetch a water-pot.

On her return she found Parthenope in the same disconsolate attitude; and the desire which she always unconsciously felt to see everyone comfortable around her prompted her to say: "What a hermit crab you are! Jack would have liked to see you."

The other girl shook her head. "Yet I am sure that he did not ask for me."

"He did not ask for anybody! We did not give him the chance, we plied him with so many questions! I am sure that his head went round!" But her good-natured fluency of explanation was wasted.

"He did not ask for anybody," replied Parthenope, with an air of melancholic conviction, "because he did not remember that there was anyone in the world but you! Oh, Sue, how do you manage to absorb people in the way you do, without even wishing it? Oh, if you could but teach me your secret."

She had clasped her hands, and there was such a sincere passion of entreaty in her voice that Susannah swallowed the half-begun laugh with which she received her companion's lugubrious compliment.

"My secret!" she repeated. "It is news to me that I have one!"

"As Willy Steele says, the world is halved between those who have everything and those who have nothing! There is no medium."

Susannah had by this time filled the bird bath out of her red water-can; and her look had lit upon a bullfinch, whose round eyes, as he sat on a neighbouring bush, were fixed with approval upon her action.

CHAPTER VII

"ENSNARED with flowers I fall on grass!" Miss Crisp was saying in what her unappreciative partner always stigmatised as her "spouting voice."

"Your friend must have had a remarkably bad gardener," replied that lady drily, and moving a little further away.

"My friend!" retorted Judith derisively. "I am a good ripe age, but I am not quite old enough to be a contemporary of Andrew Marvell's—no! do not go away! I want to *break* something to you."

Mrs. Henley paused. "To break something to me?"

It was the day following that of Jack Cameron's *coup d'essai* in paying calls and a Sunday. The two women were standing in the little bit of rough ground adjoining the sunk garden and deploring the unaccounted-for death of two of the broom bushes which shed their gold over it in spring. What added to Mrs. Henley's regrets was that it was impossible to blame Jackson for it; the loss of the yellow glory being plainly owing to the visitation of God. They had quarrelled a little over it, which was the reason why Miss Crisp had resorted to quotation; her unfailing method of retaliation; and which never failed to *draw* her companion.

"To break to me?" repeated the matron.

"Yes—that I had asked Willy Steele to supper to-night."

The other shrugged her substantial shoulders, but being fundamentally hospitable, said resignedly:

"Well, I suppose there is enough food to go round."

"There is always that, I should hope!"—with a slight warmth—"but it would not matter if there were not. He will not eat anything."

Mrs. Henley raised her eyebrows. "Is he on hunger

strike? Dear me!" In quite another key—"How far away hunger-striking seems now, and yet it is not nearly a year!"

Both were silent for a moment, the War laying its wonted incubus upon them; then:

"Poor boy!" Judith said gently. "It is very idiotic of him, but he cannot shake off the idea that he will be thought a 'shirker.'"

"After all, somebody must stay at home," replied Mrs. Henley, with rather grudging common sense; "and with one leg shorter than the other, astigmatic eyes, and a poor digestion, he would not cut much of a figure in the trenches!"

"He certainly would not!"

"Now, if it were *Jackson*, there would be some sense in calling him a shirker!"

"He is fifty-five!"

Jackson's employer gave a pregnant snort. "So he tells you, but one may believe as much of that as one chooses!"

"You might have a difficulty in replacing him! Mrs. Sandford told me to-day that she had been interviewing one of the lady gardeners, who had engaged to do everything that a man did."

"She might easily do as much as *some* men do," retorted Mrs. Henley, with a withering parting flier at her employé.

She departed, and was immediately succeeded by Parthenope, who with a book under her arm was about to ensconce herself on the seat where she dawdled and dreamed away so much of her life.

"You are not going to read now?" asked her aunt in surprise—"it is *quite* dressing time!"

Miss Bethell yawned. "Why should I dress? It is Sunday, and only cold supper."

Judith laughed. She was not quite sure whether it was an alleviation to or an aggravation of the trials that her niece's idiosyncrasies caused her that that niece so often provoked her to laughter unintentionally.

"Is dressing then a tribute to hot food?" she enquired, rallying. But there was no answering mirth in her companion's pensive face.

"I was looking through some books just now," she said, "and I came upon 'The Hound of Heaven,'" indicating the volume under her arm. "And I thought how refreshing it would be if I could persuade you to read it aloud to me; the *timbre* of your voice——"

But her aunt broke in with a mocking interruption.

"I am much more inclined to be refreshed by pressed beef than by a Mystical Poem! Well, I am off. Even if I did not change my gown for my own comfort, I should think it a necessary civility to a guest to do so!"

"The Hound of Heaven" fell from Parthenope's grasp, relaxed in surprise. "A guest?" she repeated "What guest?"

"No one very exciting," replied her aunt—"only poor Willy Steele. I met him wandering aimlessly in the wood, and he looked so downcast that I *had* to ask him to supper. He quite jumped at it; though I told him it was a cold collation."

While Miss Crisp was speaking, a change, out of all proportion, in that lady's opinion, to the speech that caused it, passed over the face of the listening girl. Her eyes lit up and the discontented droop of the corners of her mouth disappeared. "What a good heart you have!" she cried, enveloping her elderly kinswoman with one encircling arm—"open as day to melting charity!—well, perhaps I had better dress, if you think that it would be discourteous not to; it is not much trouble to slip into a tea-gown."

"Quite right," replied Judith, with an encouraging nod, and bearing her niece's endearments courageously, since she knew that that young lady's intention of adorning herself would soon set her at liberty, "be quick about it, and put on something becoming."

Parthenope having departed with an alacrity much beyond her usual speed, Judith stooped, and picking up

the forgotten "Hound of Heaven," observed to herself with good-natured cynicism :

"Fancy thinking it worth while to grow pink and fig yourself out for poor Willy Steele !"

Three-quarters of an hour later, the indigenous quartette, with the addition of the one guest, were gathered round the pressed beef ; and its concomitants ; concomitants so succulent and well ordered as to make the cold Sunday supper rather a treat than a mortification. It was a subject upon which both hostesses cordially agreed ; and Mrs. Henley's tribute to the amenity of the repast, "I am sure that it is hygienic to over-eat oneself now and then ; so I always over-eat myself on principle on Sunday evening !" was not more sincere than her coadjutor's more general and dogmatic utterance, "Sunday is a feast day, and it is illogical to choose a *feast* day on which to mortify one's insides !"

Both the fare and the round table that supported it were pretty and good ; and the effect of cheerful beauty not much impaired by the candle shades—painted and not very successfully painted, by Parthenope. Miss Bethell was always so depressed and depreciating about anything achieved by herself, that none of her housemates had the heart to set them on fire on purpose ! Cheerfulness was the leading note of the jointly-run house. The house was a sun trap—with the effect of sunniness even when clouds hid the orb of day, and if he did appear ever so grudgingly he could not escape being caught and trapped by some one of the windows that courted him at so many angles. Even if the house had not been naturally sunny, Susannah would have made it so. As it was they played into one another's hands.

Susannah had come in a little late ; having been devoting her afternoon to work at the Y.M.C.A. Canteen. Her toilette had been scamped ; but she had stuck a very successful little branch—or rather twig—of just bursting beech leaves into the sash of her plain faint green gown. Now she was making the salad—a salad which Willy

Steele a little later registered an inward resolution to cast up in bitter contrast against the directors of his home commissariat.

Susannah was also lightening her labours and the little delay imposed on her family by her deferred appearance —by anecdotes of the number of ginger-beer bottles she had uncorked during the afternoon, and which she triumphantly announced to have run to the surprising figure of 230 !

CHAPTER VIII

YOUNG Steele had come in with an apology, addressed to Mrs. Henley: "It is very good of you to ask me; but I am afraid that I am not likely to be a very lively guest."

"Everybody cannot be lively!" replied she with her usual unvarnished veracity, and not attempting to dispute the statement—"it would be very oppressive if they were!"

He smiled rather drily at her innocent acquiescence in his self-depreciation, and rejoined: "Well, then, if you will put up with me?"

And she, shaking his hand cordially and thinking that the eyes behind his clumsy-looking spectacles were better than she had remembered them—intelligent and rather appealing—assured him sincerely that she would.

Susannah, having been absent all the afternoon, was not aware of his intended presence; but the tone in which she asked, "Why did no one tell me that you were coming?" clearly indicated that her family's silence had deprived her of a piece of good news.

And Parthenope? Parthenope, as was instantly verified by a gratified aunt, was looking her very best. An undoubtedly becoming tea-gown of some clinging Eastern stuff clad her young form; her eyes were shining; her hair was made the most of—it was not a very strong point—and her lips were not turned down at the corners, and were redder than usual. The question flashed across her senior's mind: "Had she been touching them up?" Judith hoped not; but resolved not to enquire.

Her features were really more regular than Susannah's, though few people ever took the trouble to verify that fact; her habitual air of down-looking discontent, and of deprecating any notice, since notice of her *must* be un-

favourable, nullified the effect of such advantages—and they were really not very few—that Nature had given her ! To-night alive, interested and judiciously decked out, she was positively attractive. In so small a party, it did not much matter who sat by whom ; yet Miss Crisp was glad that accident had placed her niece opposite instead of neighbour to the young man, whose lugubrious presence had transfigured her ! Her look of meek deferential admiration whenever it met the glare of his goggles must surely be soothing to one so smarting from a profound and recent mortification. An embargo had been laid upon the War as a subject of conversation.

“ I shall fine anyone who mentions it five shillings for the first offence, and ten shillings for the second ! ” Mrs. Henley had said authoritatively ; but Susannah had not been present at the prohibition ; and, although obliquely, she very shortly transgressed it.

“ The Camp looked so pretty to-day,” she said in that voice which always seemed to be telling good news, “ I suppose that it is due to the dry weather ; but the tents keep so miraculously clean ! Do you remember how deplorably dirty they were last winter ? ”

She threw out the enquiry generally ; but there was a friendly intention of inclusion toward young Steele. The latter's face fell. To his sore spirit the dirty tents in question symbolised all from which he was shut out ; and Susannah, noticing this excess of sensitiveness, slid smoothly away from a theme which it would have been difficult to suppose possessed of any power of inflicting pain.

“ Lady Cameron was helping at the canteen,” she said, addressing the information to her mother. “ You will be glad to hear that we did not do Jack any harm ! Nurse Jones asked him what we could have done to him to put him in such good spirits, and you will be relieved to learn that he seldom lies on a sofa, and hates *Benger*.”

“ Why did not you come in to see him ? Parthenope, did not you tell Mr. Steele that we were expecting Jack Cameron ? ”

Mrs. Henley was the speaker, and in her voice and face was the faint trace of dislike which mostly appeared in them when she was addressing her young housemate.

Steele looked embarrassed.

The message relating to Jack Cameron's expected visit, transmitted to him by Parthenope through his sister, since his locked door had prevented her delivering it in person, was strongly dissuasive; yet he could not give her away by saying so. Involuntarily he glanced at her to get a cue for his reply, and one of the expectant listeners hoped that she detected, through the cruel disfigurement of the spectacles, an almost tender eye-beam meeting the gentle submission of her look, which seemed to say: "Show me up, if it is any help to you to do so." But he did not. Instead he answered evasively: "From what you say he seems to be getting on famously. I suppose"—with a strangled sigh—"that he will be going off back soon!"

"His elbow will have to be a little freer from foreign substance before he does!" returned Mrs. Henley grimly. "He would not answer me when I asked him whether any more bits of bone had come out lately, and so I have no doubt that they have."

"And his jaws are not really right yet," put in Judith. "They do not catch properly. I saw yesterday at tea that it still hurt him to eat."

Steele made no comment. His eyes had left Parthenope, and were bent on his plate. He was ashamed of himself, and at the same time afraid lest anyone should detect the outward signs of a gladness that he could not help feeling at the news that the return of one whom he so profoundly envied to the field of glory was indefinitely postponed.

Susannah said nothing; in fact she apparently had not heard the last sentences, as Taffy, whose table talk was always abundant, was with urgent voice, and handsome tan paws, clawing and calling her into attention to his needs.

The guest was not enough of a stranger for his presence

to make any difference in the usual habits of the family ; so that after supper the two elder women betook themselves each to her several card table. They had begun by playing a joint game, but had squabbled so much over it that years ago they had exchanged their duet for two solos ; and now dedicated a peaceful hour to their solitary boards ; peaceful except when occasionally one proclaimed successes with too much emphasis and the other hinted doubt as to the legitimacy of the means employed in winning them.

Susannah produced a large sheet, brought home for repairs from the hospital, and proceeded with patient deftness to undo the mistaken industry of a neophyte who had managed to introduce a large hard seam into the middle of the sheet just where the sufferer's spine would feel the fullest rigour of it. The remaining two members of the party were thus thrown upon each other's resources for entertainment, and it was not surprising that at a hesitating suggestion from Miss Bethell that the young man might like a cigarette in the study, and an equally hesitating assent on his part, they should both have disappeared through the door.

They were scarcely gone when Miss Crisp, shuffling her cards, spoke. "I never saw Parthe look so well in my life."

The remark was addressed to Mrs. Henley, and there was assertive triumph in its tone. The person appealed to slightly lifted her eyebrows.

"H'm ! a little touched up perhaps ?" Then, with a more generous impulse following the carping one, she added : "Yes, she *does* look well."

Susannah glanced up from her sheet. Apparently she found her mother's concession inadequate.

"What a nasty grudging old thing you are," she said with laughing disrespect. "I could not take my eyes off her at supper ; nor—as far as his barnacles would allow me to see—could our 'Willy' !"

CHAPTER IX

MEANWHILE in the study, in the fostering atmosphere of a tête-à-tête, where there was no need for misgivings as to what effect one was producing upon a mixed company, Miss Bethell was gently expanding her petals to catch the beams from those imperfectly visible orbs which yet seemed to convey something not simple gratitude.

She longed to tear off the impeding glasses, and verify the amount of that quality on which she might congratulate herself as having excited ; or ascertain whether possibly her companion's expression might not connote something more satisfactory to inspire than an emotion which might equally be called forth by sixpence given to a beggar ; or a hymn-book shared with a stranger in church.

As her companion showed no sign of removing his spectacles, she was left in a doubt that was not without the exhilaration of a tremulous pleasure. Both young people were comfortably established in well-stuffed arm-chairs, but Parthenope was not utilising the back of hers ; leaning forward instead in an attitude that might lend itself to the flattering interpretation of being anxious not to lose a drop of the honied wisdom which might distil from the lips that she was deferentially watching.

"Men crawl before Susannah ! and Parthenope crawls before men !" Mrs. Henley had once stingingly remarked to the aunt of the last-named young person. She had apologised afterwards amply and with real remorse ; but the epigram stuck so firmly in the mind of the person to whom it was addressed, that she sometimes felt as if she had made it herself.

On the present occasion Miss Bethell's companion seemed in no hurry to speak. A sense of indefinite and

surface well-being—a well-being due partly to the memory of the salad, partly to the spirit soothing influence of the Bateman's Turkish medium cigarette, and partly to Parthenope's censer swinging figuratively under his nose, kept him silent ; and left it to his votary to initiate the conversation, if conversation there must be. Personally he would have preferred that there should be none ; and yet there was something soothing too in the little cooing voice which presently ejaculated as if the tribute had been forced out of her.

"How well you parried Mrs. Henley's thrust ! When she pounces upon one like that, it makes me feel paralysed ; but you baffled her so thoroughly, and yet with such perfect politeness !"

Steele took the cigarette out of his mouth and held it meditatively between his finger and thumb. Had his evasion of his hostess's point-blank question really been such a miracle of courteous subtlety ? At the time it had seemed to himself but clumsily done.

As his tribute to her compliment remained a mute one, she went gently on.

"Perhaps I was wrong in dissuading you from meeting Jack Cameron ! perhaps the pleasure of a talk with him—not that he ever has anything to say to anybody when Susannah is present—might have outweighed the pain." Then, as no immediate disclaimer followed this suggestion, she added with a suspicion of faltering in her voice : "I think you must know that I would not voluntarily add anything to your burden !"

There could be no doubt of it. Spectacles might interpose their spiteful barrier. They could not wholly hide the gleam of warmed and warming gratitude which shot from the orbs they disfigured.

"I know that I cannot thank you half enough for the sympathy and delicate tact which you have always shown me"—the young man answered with an accent of touched sincerity—"I wish to Heaven that you could inoculate my family with some of those qualities !"

This was very satisfactory, and for the moment the speaker was perfectly oblivious that this was by no means the habitual attitude of his mind towards his present companion. He forgot as if they had never been, the many occasions on which he had laid strenuous injunctions on his sisters to conceal from Miss Bethell, no matter at what expenditure of lies, the fact of his being at home. Out of his memory vanished like smoke all the locked doors and short answers with which he had tried to keep her attentions at bay.

The gratified colour swam into Parthenope's cheeks. 'What a delightful mirror of herself as embodied in this picture of exquisite subtly comprehending womanhood was being held up to her eyes by one not hitherto at all over lavish in civilities. Only the misgiving, bred of her habitual self-distrust, that she might not be able to live up to it, at all marred her enjoyment of the unexpected tribute.

"It is astonishing," she said presently, with a sort of diffidence, "how much the people who love one best can contrive to wound one without intending it, if one has the misfortune to be at all sensitive!"

Her look was fixed with half absent pensiveness upon him; and a sort of remorse began to steal into the young man's consciousness. How uniquely absorbed he had been in his own woes; and yet here, close by, was another sufferer. Now he came to think of it, the poor girl had always looked very dismal. Until this moment he had never troubled himself to ask why, but doubtless she had some cause for it. Ought he to ask her what? He had much rather not, but she gave him the impression of wanting to unbosom herself.

While he was casting about for a judicious way of inviting her confidence, she spoke again.

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness!" she said; but added immediately, as if chiding herself for her unintentional egotism: "When you feel that your endurance is getting strained to the breaking-point, you

must remember that you always have a harbour of refuge *here !* ”

Steele bent his head a little ; conviction of sin, and a compunctious memory of how often he had darted past the gate of the house where he was now “ comforted with flagons and supported with apples ” for fear of being intercepted by his present Paraclete, weighing it down !

“ We are all sorry for you ! ” continued his companion ; divining something not discouraging in his muteness—“ all in our different ways ! Susannah, as you know ”—with a little fleeting smile—“ cannot really ever be very sorry for anything. But up to her capacity she is sorry for you.”

“ It is very good of her ! ” he answered ; but without enthusiasm for the somewhat limited amount of sympathy thus indicated.

“ I always think ”—with an accent of wonder—“ that Susannah is like the sun, who ‘ shineth upon the just and upon the unjust ’ and does not much care which ! ”

“ Is she ? ” There was indifference in the tone. Willy Steele was one of the few persons whom Susannah left cold ; and what a beautiful quality it was in him !

“ Parthe,” said Mrs. Henley, holding the girl’s hand longer than usual, as she bid her good-night, “ if I were you I should cultivate cheerfulness ! It is uncommonly becoming ! ”

CHAPTER X

"SUSANNAH!" said Miss Crisp next morning, addressing her young friend, who, in a new blue sun bonnet, and with an armful of cabbage leaves destined to convey to the expectant hens a rural idea which their rather confined quarters failed to supply, was setting off to the poultry yard; "did you mean what you said last night?"

"Did I say anything very striking last night? If so, what was it? If it was anything very remarkable I might use it again."

She stood smilingly waiting, perhaps a little bored inwardly at a needless detention; but if so not showing a sign of it.

"That Willy Steele could not take his eyes off Parthenope at supper?"

"Of course I did! Do I ever lie?"

"I am not so sure about that!" returned the elder woman, breaking into an irresistible smile of pleasure, as she looked at the delightful object before her, and yet with a ring of faint misgiving in her voice; "if the lie were a small one, and one that would be very agreeable to the person lied to, I would not put it past you!"

The other gave a gay protesting nod, and lifted her pale gold eyebrows. "I am a *femme incomprise*!" she said, "but in this case I am certainly *sans reproche*! There could be no mistake about it! His face had that indescribably silly look—don't you know?—which they get!"

Judith laughed. The knowledge of how wide was Susannah's experience of the expression in question on the countenances of her masculine acquaintances; and the perfect unconsciousness of there being anything unusual

in so matter-of-fact and unimportant a phenomenon, amused the elder woman. But in a moment or two she was grave again.

"It would be the making of her," she said thoughtfully. "If she could believe that she had inspired a real feeling in—in—well, almost anybody!"

Susannah stood stock-still; for a moment oblivious of all the carefully laid out plans of occupation, which were to succeed the cabbages in her brimful day; and Judith continued:

"I have never seen such a craving to be loved in any human being."

Her companion received this statement at first in silence; then, with a long drawn-in breath, she ejaculated: "*How* extraordinary!"

"It seems so to you!" returned the other with what sounded like faintly reproachful intonation. "You, who suffer from a glut of what she lacks!"

But from this aspect of the question, Susannah slid rather determinedly away. "Well," she cried lightly, "we must all put our hand to the plough! We must make him fond of her, whether he likes it or not!"

Her light feet were already fidgiting to be off, when Miss Crisp detained her.

"There is," she said solemnly, laying one hand on the semi-transparent sleeve nearest her, "one hopeful circumstance in the case, one thing to be thankful for, and that is that he does not in the least admire *you*!"

But Susannah was off; and her parting words came flying back in a laugh. "You must be very short of subjects for gratitude if you are thankful for such a very small mercy as that!"

Meanwhile, in the house over the way, that one of Willy Steele's sisters who passed for his favourite was after a preliminary and unanswered knock turning the handle of his bedroom-study door. To her surprise it was not locked, and she entered unopposed. Her brother was sitting at his writing-table in the window, and a pen was

in his hand, though it did not appear to be doing much travelling over the sheet of MS. paper before him.

"You do not mind my coming in?" asked the girl in a chastened and condolatory voice, then with a change of key to a rather lugubrious congratulation: "Oh, how glad I am to see that you are able to occupy yourself again!"

Steele laid down his pen, as if to express how little foundation there was for his sister's satisfaction, and looked at her rather enduringly than gratefully.

"Is that," she asked, approaching him despite his doubtfully welcoming attitude, and casting a scanning eye over the MS. before him, "is that the half-finished article upon the 'Bursting of the World's Reservoirs' which you began before you left Balliol and thought of sending to 'The Round Table'?" He nodded grudgingly. "Well, I will not disturb you. I am only too thankful to think that you have the heart to take it up again! I am off!" But, instead of being off, her eyes, discontented as were the eyes of the whole Steele family, glanced out of doors over her brother's shoulder. "Oh, how *much* the best view in the house you have here! What a charming glimpse of the woods, and one can ignore half the odious villas! Oh, how I wish I had chosen this instead of my room when we first came here!"

He looked at her half absently, but kindly enough. "Why did not you say so before? I am quite willing to change; it is all one to me where I sit."

There was such a touch of dreariness in his tone that her heart and conscience smote her—she was really fond of him—and, coming behind his chair, dropped a compunctious kiss on the top of his head. "Oh, no! I could not think of such a thing! Upset all your faddy little arrangements! When you are such an old bachelor, too? Never!"

She laughed a little in the faint and rather mirthless way that was the nearest thing the Steele family could do towards hilarity; then, as he did not respond, she added: "Well, I really am off! In point of fact, I only came to

ask you about what time you are likely to be going out, because, if you tell me, I will be on the watch."

"*On the watch?*" he replied with a semi-bored and wholly puzzled accent, "on the watch for what?"

"Why, for Parthenope, of course!" returned Miss Laura, in genuine surprise. "Doesn't she always try to intercept you? And did not you ask me always to try and give you warning? Didn't you christen her the other day 'Parthenope the Pursuer'? Didn't you quote what Lord Byron said of Lady Caroline Lamb that he was 'pursued by a mad skeleton'?"

This stringent apostrophe, the veracity of whose statements he was unable to impeach, produced some appearance of confusion in the person to whom it was addressed; and it took him a moment or two to pull himself together enough to rebut or rather evade the accusations contained in it.

"You are apt to take too much *au pied de la lettre!*" he said in a key of brotherly rebuke. "You know that for the last few days I have not been keen on seeing anybody!"

"No, I know you have not; and you have particularly wished to avoid *her*." A moment later, with a tinge of surprised curiosity: "But you feel differently now?"

That tact was not his sister Laura's strong point was a fact that Willy Steele had often regretfully verified; and at the present moment the consciousness of this lack came home somewhat strongly to him.

"I cannot be bothered to analyse my feelings!" he responded testily; "she was very kind and sympathetic last night, and she looked ripping!"

Miss Laura's mouth opened before speech came through it, and even her melancholy eyes widened, as she ejaculated:

"*Parthenope? Ripping!*"

CHAPTER XI

"JACKSON, you have the brains of a flea!"

"Yes, Miss!"

This brief dialogue—it took place on the following morning—was motived by the fact of Mrs. Henley's gardener having, with monstrous and strictly forbidden prematureness, planted out some young geraniums, which a spiteful sneaping late frost had taken the opportunity to pinch and blacken. The candid expression of her estimate of her servant's intellect made the employer at once feel better, nor did the employé apparently feel much worse; judging by the promptitude with which he turned the conversation upon a topic that interested him more than the pursuit of his own art, viz. the Economic aspect of the War, as that aspect affected himself.

"Look 'ere, Miss! Bread's gone up three 'alfpence on the loaf!"

But "Miss" would not listen to him, and uttering only a disdainful "Humph!" marched off in the direction of the house.

Her Souffre Douleur, relieved at getting off so cheaply, returned in peace to his futile labours; and she, approaching the hall door, perceived that a man, with a parcel under his arm, was standing before it. She was about to wave him to the back door, when a second glance informed her that the visitor was a legitimately front-door one; and, indeed, no other than the melancholy youth whom she had compassionately welcomed to Sunday supper two days ago.

"I could not make the bell ring," he explained, taking off his hat, and looking—Mrs. Henley could not imagine why—rather silly.

"It requires a good tug," she answered, suiting the action to the word, and making the welkin ring with the vigour of her own appeal. "I do not know why I rang!" she said, after having accomplished this feat; "I can show you in as well as Sarah could!"

She threw him a friendly glance of invitation to enter as she spoke; but she could not help a slight glint of surprise in the tail of her eye.

"I have not come to call," replied the young man awkwardly, and even stammering a little. "Of course, I know that it is much too early for that; and I'm afraid I am never much of a hand at it—but—" He paused, and she, looking still expectant and still friendly, tried to help him out.

"Perhaps——" she suggested, glancing at the parcel under his arm, which, on a nearer view, took on a vaguely literary aspect, "that you came to leave that?"

She stretched out her hand as she spoke towards the object indicated; but the young man showed no readiness to yield it up. He grew rather pink, and the two words, "Miss Bethell," issued from his lips. They were meant to have been followed by an explanatory sentence, but Mrs. Henley gave him no time to produce it.

"Oh, Parthe!" she cried with the greatest alacrity, "you have come to see Parthe? I am sure that she will be delighted. You will find her in the study. I need not show you the way there, need I?"

She gave a little laugh of dismissal, and was turning away when Steele's voice arrested her; Steele's voice with a new note of what sounded like faint alarm in it.

"I wanted to see her," he said, speaking quickly, yet not quite easily, "because she has very kindly offered to—to come to my help with—with a bit of writing that I have been doing, or rather trying to do."

His hearer's nostril developed a slight curl. "*Poetry?*" she asked; a perceptible chill in her voice evidencing what her opinion was of any one who drank of the Pierian Fount.

"No!" he answered in hasty reassurance, "only plain russet prose!"

She drew a breath of relief. "Thank God for that! But how is Parthe going to help you? She has not taken to scribbling, has she?"

There was such an unaffected dread in her tone that, despite his embarrassment, Steele smiled slightly.

"Not that I am aware of."

"*'Une femme qui écrit à deux fois tort,'*" quoted a third person coming up and overhearing the last two sentences—"elle augmente le nombre des livres et diminue le nombre des femmes!" Do you think that true, Mr. Steele? No, Harriet, you need not be bolting off. That is not verse!"

"Then it is Mme. de Sévigné?" rejoined Harriet resentfully.

Reassured on this point, she paused in her just-sketched flight, and, yielding to the impulse of curiosity as to what the help to be given by a person whom she herself had never found helpful, to a young man whose attitude toward her advances had hitherto showed a something more than masterly inactivity, Mrs. Henley repeated her question.

"How is Parthe going to help you?"

To the ears of Parthe's aunt, there seemed a slight flavour of incredulity in her friend's tone; which, under the circumstances, she deplored, and could only hope that it was imperceptible to the postulant for Miss Bethell's aid.

"She has very kindly offered," he answered, "to type a few pages of my rubbish!" As he spoke thus with embarrassed modesty, he squinted obliquely at his MS.

"Can she type?" The incredulity that had got into these three little words was so much more pronounced than the former that the speaker herself must have become conscious of it. Whether warned by an inward monitor, or meeting a reproachful shot from her coadjutor's eye, she added quickly: "But, of course, she can if she says so, only I do not happen to have heard her mention

it ! Well, I suppose you must not keep your amanuensis waiting."

She ended encouragingly, pointing inside the door towards the goal, and the visitor, shyly thankful to be released—Mrs. Henley always frightened him—did not need a second telling.

The two women looked at each other ; a latent conspiracy in each eye ; then, with a common precaution against being overheard, moved away from the house and took the path to the little wild garden.

"How surprising !" ejaculated the matron ; and the spinster retorted with a flavour of sharpness.

"What possessed you to throw doubt upon her knowing how to type ?"

"I had no idea that she could."

The tone conveyed so unaffected a wonder at the hearing of any achievement by Miss Bethell, that though recognising the absence of an offensive intention, that young lady's aunt at once showed a disposition to bristle.

"You never believe in Parthenope's power to achieve anything."

This was so distressingly true that the person to whom it was addressed took a minute to answer.

"I do not think that she often tries !"

"But she is trying now !" cried Miss Crisp, almost with passion, "and do let us try to help her—at all events not to put a spoke in her wheel. It would be the making of her if she could get up a real hearty interest in anyone—I mean"—(with a sudden afterthought of a rather mortifying hue)—"anyone who was ready to reciprocate it properly."

"It would be a capital thing !" assented the other, with an accent of perfect sincerity ; "and his coming of *his own accord* to seek her out looks promising ! I *was* surprised when I saw him ! And after all, if she makes a mess of what he probably justly calls his 'rubbish,' why, I dare say the world will not be much the poorer !"

The speech had, on the whole, a conciliatory intention ;

but there was a good deal of stiffening in Judith's rejoinder.

"I do not know why you should be so uncommonly surprised at so ordinary a circumstance. You never show any surprise when we are bombarded by Susannah's admirers."

Susannah's mother drew up her rather handsome head.

"Why should I?" she enquired with a calm confidence that drove her companion to a rather undignified burst of reproach.

"Do you grudge my poor child her one ewe lamb?"

Mrs. Henley regarded her companion with an eye that spoke mingled ire and amusement.

"Is he her ewe lamb?" she asked pregnantly; and had the last word!

CHAPTER XII

"SIR EDWARD and Milady propose themselves for tea!" Mrs. Henley observed in the early afternoon of the same day. "I had no idea that he could get away from the War Office till evening! I wonder why they are coming?"

"To ask Susannah's hand in marriage for Jack, of course!" replied Miss Crisp, a slight wrath still remaining as evidence of the somewhat squally weather of the morning. "That is what you always believe to be the motive of everyone who rings the front door bell!"

"Or to announce his approaching union with Nurse Jones!" put in Susannah, in that hasty buffer-wise manner which was not uncommon with her.

But her mother was not to be so baulked in her stroke.

"Not always!" she replied deliberately, and fixing her friend with a not altogether admiring eye. "I never thought this morning, for instance, that poor Willy Steele could be in the running."

"Was Willy Steele here again to-day?" interposed Susannah, in a key of lively interest which was not all feigned. "The plot *is* thickening!"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Henley, whose spurt of ill-nature was fizzling out. "He came to see Parthenope! He undoubtedly came to see Parthenope. I should be the last to deny that Parthe was his objective!"

There was something perhaps not very flattering in the improbability of the truth of her statement implied by the speaker's reiterated insistence upon it; but you must not look a gift olive branch in the mouth, and Judith accepted it for what it was.

"How delightful!" cried Susannah in good-natured excitement; "and though we may not think him very

exhilarating company, yet you will see that they will buck each other up wonderfully, and both get quite rollicking ! ”

“ He is perfectly independent financially ! ” Mrs. Henley remarked reflectively. “ An old godmother left him something very comfortable in a small way. That is a fortunate circumstance ; as I do not seem to see either of them earning their living by the sweat of their brows.”

“ I always thought it sounded a very nasty way of doing it,” commented Miss Crisp, with a laugh ; and magnanimously ignoring the slur upon her niece’s capacity for remunerative labour. “ But we are going rather too fast ! One must not build an Eiffel Tower upon a type-script.”

In the afternoon the Camerons arrived as expected to tea. The cherry blossom’s exquisite frailty was a thing of the past—gone to join the “ neiges d’Antan,” and the sky towards Aldershot showed such a cloudy slate colour that the tea-table was set indoors in the incorrigibly cheerful drawing-room. Sir Edward said that he was glad of it. Had his cup been offered to him in the chilled and rain-threatened garden he would have said the same.

Sir Edward was charming ; and always said the pleasant thing in the pleasantest way ! and mostly said it sincerely.

Lady Cameron was glad, too, partly because she always disliked *al fresco* food, and partly because, having tea in the drawing-room facilitated the suggestion of alterations in the disposal of its furniture. Besides being a handsome, well-bred woman, Milady had two leading characteristics—a major and a minor one. The major one was an ineradicable conviction that no young women and few mature ones could look upon her son without “ lusting after him,” to lead him to the altar—a position which demanded the most sleepless vigilance on her part. The minor one was an inveterate desire to change everything in the arrangement of everybody’s surroundings. There was a tale current—whether fact or legend—that on one occasion a hostess of Lady Cameron’s, returning sooner

than she was expected from an absence of a few hours, found every picture dismounted from the walls of her boudoir, and lying on the chairs or carpet, in preparation for the new hanging of them, on which her visitor was engaged. On the present occasion, she might, in one respect at least, enjoy her tea with an easy mind ; as the object of her maternal vigilance did not accompany his parents.

"Well, good-bye, dear," she had said, going into his room to bid him farewell, and dropping a fervent kiss on the top of his head, as he lay envious and disconsolate on a sofa awaiting the arrival of a male masseur, whom the doctor had ordered to replace Nurse Jones in that function, with a view to hurrying up the unstiffening of the stubborn elbow joint. She added with a little laugh : "I shall be afraid to face Susannah, when she finds out that you are not with us !"

Captain Cameron moved his head, as if wishing to escape any contact with a person—even a mother—who could utter such a tantalising falsity.

"You old luney," he said impatiently. "I always wonder whether you believe those idiotic sort of things when you say them ? You know as well as I do, that if she were to see me cut into little bits, it would not bring a cloud over her beautiful eyes."

"Are they so beautiful ? They always seem to me to lack expression !" replied his mother. She knew that it was an unwise cavil ; but could not resist the temptation.

He did not take it up ; probably he was used to such blasphemies from the same quarter ; but his voice took on a persuasive tone.

"Mind that you have a good look at her to see whether she seems pretty fit. They allow her to overwork herself so scandalously ; and she is such a willing horse, God bless her ! So promise to tell me exactly how she looks."

"I can tell you that beforehand !" replied Milady sharply. "She will be looking as blooming as a dairymaid

and as strong as a horse, whether a willing or an unwilling one."

Repentance followed hard on this utterance ; hard, but too late ; and the knowledge of having lost her temper with her poor boy spoilt Lady Cameron's run in her husband's company—the latter a not very common and valued treat—to " Grays," which was the unobtrusive name of the joint-stock " Henley-Crisp-Villa."

Self-reproach and irritation still seethed in her under the smooth distinction of her exterior, when she met the friends she had come to visit. Nor were things improved by the action of Sir Edward, who, bending over and kissing Susannah's hand, with his usual knightly grace, said :

" We feel like culprits coming without Jack ; and he, poor fellow, was in despair, but the doctor was inexorable."

He knew that the form of the sentence was certain to displease his wife ; but though he quite disliked annoying her, yet the temptation to say the thing that he felt would be the most acceptable to the person whom he was addressing, was, as usual, too strong for him.

" Poor fellow, indeed ! " echoed Milady, in her quiet refined voice, that yet had a slight edge upon its sweetness. " We left him all forlorn, for his adored Nurse Jones has been superseded in her massage by a great coarse man-creature ! "

She laughed a little as she brought her speech to a close ; and there was not anyone in the room, even the parlourmaid, who was bringing in tea, who did not know what she meant.

" Yes, that is hard luck for him ! " said Susannah, with the open hearty sympathy of a good comrade ; " but I suppose that it is the best chance for getting him most quickly off the sick-list."

This speech in its obvious openness of goodwill and friendly disengagement so evidently not assumed, ought to have conciliated Jack's mother ; but, on the contrary, it heightened her inward exasperation. She would have given five years of her life that Jack should be indifferent

to Susannah ; but that Susannah should be indifferent to Jack was an outrage !

“ So that he may get back to the trenches as soon as possible ? ” she asked in a key of veiled resentment. “ Are you in such a hurry to be rid of him ? ”

At the moment of being asked this question, Miss Henley was kneeling at the feet of the person who had put it, arranging a footstool for her. She knew that Milady liked to have her prettily shod feet hoisted up into a modest prominence. One of the secrets of Susannah’s success was that she never forgot people’s small likes and dislikes ; nor ever *mixed* them.

“ I,” she answered in unfeigned surprise, “ want to get rid of such an old friend ! That is not very likely ! ”

There was mild upbraiding in her tone ; but not the smallest change of colour, or sign of confusion ; and Lady Cameron, looking down upon the gold glint of hair and the blue beam of eyes, observed to herself about the latter : “ I was quite right ! They have no expression at all ! ”

CHAPTER XIII

OF the two visitors at Grays, one—the female one—had the sensation on her homeward run, of her excursion not having been a satisfactory one, though it had succeeded in its ostensible object of securing the aid of the composite family at an entertainment to convalescent Tommies, which she was arranging for the following week. But her efforts to take down Susannah had been clumsy, and had not come off; and in face of the girl's sweet civility had made her feel herself extremely ill-bred.

With respect, too, to her minor hobby, the sport had been poor, and the bag small. The only alteration she had been able to effect in her friends' drawing-room was the transference of two valuable old powder blue Chinese teapots from the recesses of a japanned cabinet to the top of a bookcase; and she felt in her bones that no sooner was her back turned than they would be restored to the original positions.

"That is a good thing over!" she said in a tone of relief. "How nice it is to be by ourselves again. We do not see too much of each other nowadays, do we? When you can get away so seldom?"

"No, that we do not!" answered her husband in hearty acquiescence. He had a sincere love and admiration for his wife; and, despite his manner, was hardly at all given to philandering. He added a moment later: "But they made themselves very pleasant, didn't they?"

The note of interrogation was due to the suspicion that something had put Milady a little out of tune.

"Oh, yes!" she answered impatiently, "of course they did; but how much too full of furniture their room is!"

"Is it? I suppose that, according to the present fashion,

it is, but their chairs are uncommonly comfortable, and I think I rather like all that crockery ! ”

Lady Cameron's answer was a slight sniff ; and her husband tactfully changed the subject.

“ That other girl—the one with the outlandish name—is coming on a bit.”

“ Parthenope ? H'm ! She is one of those people whose existence I never can remember, unless somebody jogs my elbow.”

Then the amiable K.C.B. realised that his consort's back was mysteriously up ; and that for the moment it was no use to try and smooth it down.

Simultaneously with this little conjugal scene, what Milady had dimly foreshadowed, was happening at Grays.

“ Get the stepladder Sarah ! ” Miss Crisp was saying to the parlourmaid, adding, “ as we are not six feet high like Sir Edward, we cannot reach those teapots.”

The latter half of her speech was addressed to Mrs. Henley ; and the elder one answered it.

“ What a tiresome craze that is of Milady's ! ” she cried ; “ and how silly she is about Jack ! ”—(the servant had by this time left the room in quest of the ladder)—“ she evidently thinks it necessary to warn Susannah off him ! If only ”—with a gesture that fifty years ago would have been called “ bridling ”—“ we could convey to her how perfectly safe he is ! ”

“ If you had had a son you would have been quite as foolish, if not more so ! ” replied Mrs. Henley's daughter, with that pleasant light disrespect to which she mostly treated her parent.

“ How angry he would have been if he could have heard her ! ” Judith said, and went on reflecting. “ How sweet and soothing it is, to think of all the odious things that one might say to people which one knows that one never will ! ”

“ Is that a quotation ? ” asked Mrs. Henley suspiciously.

“ Not that I am aware of. As far as I know it is my very own.”

"One of your wise, witty and tender sayings!" added Susannah, with a laugh and stroking her old friend's shoulder with her youthful impertinence of patronage.

And then the parlourmaid returned with the step-ladder, and Susannah, springing up it, handed the tea-pots back to their owners, who, receiving them with reverent care, restored them to the safe privacy of their cabinet.

Parthenope had hitherto not spoken since the departure of the guests; though her family had verified with surprise that she had volunteered several remarks to them; that her air was cheerful and her dress becoming. She now said almost jocosely:

"I suppose that your trouble will all be thrown away; and that you will have to put them back when next she comes!"

"We must not go to meet misfortune," replied Susannah, backing agilely down the steps; and Mrs. Henley remarked drily:

"Her energies will probably take a new direction, she will very likely try to have the grandfather's clock removed to the boot-hole!"

They all laughed; and even Miss Bethell's thin merriment mingled with the general cackle; though afterwards she observed pensively to Susannah:

"How shortly your mother answers me. She uses a different tone to what she employs to anyone else! With her I always have the sense of being unloved!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" replied Miss Henley, with that breezy brushing away of cobwebs, which was one of her characteristics—"she is all right. I did not notice any shortness; but if there was, perhaps she has not quite got over your telling Mrs. Tudor Price that mother said her appearance always reminded her of an early Victorian mahogany sideboard."

"I thought it would have amused her," replied Parthenope, sadly. "Oh, how hard it is not to make mistakes!"

The idea of suggesting that to a lady conscious of being unusually wide and red, the pungent comparison in question might possibly not appeal, crossed Susannah's mind, only to be dismissed. Parthe was Parthe; and would probably remain Parthe to the end of the chapter. Yet, as the days went on, to one of the household at least this axiom did not seem to be as certain and self-evident as it had hitherto appeared.

"Whatever else this unspeakable War has done," Judith said one evening, as she and Mrs. Henley sat—their Patience tables ignored—feverishly making respirator bags—"it has at least had the effect of bringing out whatever is best in many people."

"In whom, for instance?"

"Well, do you not think—haven't you noticed that there is a wonderful improvement of late in Parthenope?"

The appeal was made with some diffidence; and the reply was neither speedy nor expansive; but Miss Crisp knew that the mahogany sideboard rankled, and made allowances. And Harriet's answer, when it did come, and considering all things, was tolerably generous.

"Yes, she does not loll about as much as she did; and she is not quite such a kill-joy. I actually heard her humming 'Are we Down-hearted?—No!' yesterday. If it were not for that deplorable habit of repeating, I have no quarrel with the girl. One is really afraid of opening one's mouth in her presence."

"It is a very tiresome trick," returned Judith in disarming assent. "She must cure herself of it; but in other respects the change is really very remarkable. I always told you when you thought her indolence so insuperable, that it was only an adequate motive that she needed to spur her on! And look at her now, never idle. For hours and hours she toils at that typewriter in the study."

There was a tinge of triumph in Miss Crisp's tone, but whether it was that the mahogany sideboard still came between Mrs. Henley and the demands of Christian charity,

there was more of inquisitiveness than conviction in her next remark :

“ Did you know that she could type ? It was news to me.”

The enquiry was rather fenced off than answered by the person to whom it was addressed.

“ I suppose that anyone can learn to type ? I never heard that a typist was like a poet, ‘ born, not made.’ Ah, there’s that wicked Taffy at the gate barking to be let in. He has been hunting with that nefarious little Aberdeen, all the afternoon ! ”

CHAPTER XIV

HAVING let in Taffy and administered to him no further punishment—Taffy was never punished !—than the assurance that he would end by coming to the gallows, which, being very clever, he perfectly understood, Miss Crisp turned back from the moon-glorified gate and drive, homewards.

But before taking up again the thread of conversation, and the mackintosh of her respirator bag, the idea occurred to her of investigating the industries of the person whose trumpet she had been sounding, and who, for the last few days, had been pursuing her labours in the study up to and even beyond her usual bedtime. That she was alone Miss Crisp knew, or thought that she did ; since Susannah had—instead of returning home from the hospital—been whirled off by the Camerons' car to help Milady with advice and suggestions for the imminent Convalescents' tea.

Milady repudiated Susannah as a daughter-in-law, but clung to her as "a very present help" in functions ; and Susannah, cheerfully aware of both facts, never refused to put her vigorous shoulder to the wheels of Lady Cameron's social and philanthropic carts when they got stuck in the mud.

It was with a pleasant feeling of inward self-congratulation on the metamorphosis of her not very satisfactory niece that Judith opened the study door ; only to be met by the sound of hysterical weeping ; and the sight of Parthenope's dark head flung down on the business-like table which occupied the centre of the room, while her body shook with sobs.

Standing over her, but not touching her, stood Willy

Steele, ejaculating in a voice of the extremest concern and confusion :

" Oh, *please* don't ! Miss Bethell ! I am more distressed than I can say ! Nothing was further from my intention than to give you pain ! Oh, *please* stop crying ! "

At the sound of the opening door, he turned towards it, and beheld the figure of his victim's aunt—if, indeed, it were not he himself that was the victim. As he did so it seemed to Judith that over his miserable and totally upset features there dawned a gleam of relief ! Without knowing what he was doing, he took hold of her hand and wrung it, and uttering in a strangled tone the words :

" It is all a mistake ! I would not have hurt her feelings for the world ! " ran out of the room.

A moment or two elapsed before Miss Crisp collected herself enough, in the face of so wholly unexpected a disaster, to ask in a key in which sternness was more conspicuous than compassion :

" What the dickens does this mean ? "

The appeal, which she felt as soon as she had uttered it, would have been more dignified without the garnish of the homely little expletive, at first met with no response. The shoulders went on heaving ; and the sobs continued their exasperating noise. Their effect on the hearer's nerves became presently so acute as to bring forth a much severer interpellation.

" I must ask you to explain what can have induced you to treat a comparative stranger to such a humiliating scene ? "

This time the invocation was successful, in so far as it resulted in a lifting of the abased head, and a cessation of the sobs, though the mouth still quivered painfully, as it framed the protesting words, "*A comparative stranger !* Oh, surely he is not that now ! "

There was such an accent of conviction in the broken voice, that for one bright moment the idea flashed through Judith's brain that Willy Steele might have—despite the unpromising appearance of the situation—declared him-

self ; and that the excessive emotion before her might be the expression of a bliss too deep for words.

But the real misery written on her niece's face now that it was exposed to her gaze, and the recollection of the swain's terrified countenance and intense but hardly lover-like appeal : " Oh, please don't, Miss Bethell," destroyed the hope almost as soon as it was formed.

She sat down at the table beside Parthenope, in a state of acute annoyance, that began to be touched with compassion. How thin her arms were, as she lifted them—the kimono sleeves falling away from them—to push the wet hair from her eyes !

" Then why, in Heaven's name ? " she asked, not at all unkindly, but in a key of hopeless puzzlement, " are you shedding this extraordinary flood of tears ? "

There was an evident inclination, on the part of the person thus addressed, to relapse into her former posture of damp recumbency, but she as evidently resisted it, and replied with a sincere attempt to steady her voice.

" You will think it very ridiculous of me ; but I am crying over my own hopeless mediocrity ! "

Possibly the cause of her niece's affliction thus candidly explained, seemed to her hearer a better grounded one than she expected, for it was only tentatively that she threw out :

" Even supposing that it were true, will it make it better to cry yourself into a jelly over it ? "

" No," replied the girl. " Nothing can make it better ! That is the hopeless part of it ! "

There was a brief silence. If you are secretly in perfect agreement with some indictment brought by a person against him or herself, it is difficult to rebut it with any heartiness.

" You know that it is true ! You know that it is a daily and hourly trial to you to verify how wanting in capacity I am ! How inferior in every way to Susannah ! Of course, capable and brilliant as you are yourself——"

" I am nothing of the kind ! " broke in Judith in angry protest, her old pale cheek showing an out-of-season pink

like a rose pinchedly flowering in December; "you have no right to say such things!—but"—more mildly and with a subsiding of her wintry blush—"what has made you so acutely conscious of your mediocrity now particularly?"

For answer Parthenope smote the typewriter before her with a vigour which must have hurt her tender palm much more than it did the offending mechanism. "You know," she said, in a stormy fever of explanation, "how the things that I try to do never come off! The laundry work, the body belts, the 'S. and S.'" She paused for assent, and her aunt's head executed a reluctant nod. "Well, here!" resumed the girl, giving another tragic tap to the typewriter, "thought I, is something that I *can* do—something really useful! I can help a person who is in urgent need of help—of sympathetic understanding help, I mean."

"Yes?"

"You do not know how remarkably clever this article on the 'Burstings of the Reservoirs of The World' is. It was a revelation even to me! And you, I know, have never rated his intellect very highly!"

There was a faint tinge of reproach in the last clause; and Miss Crisp could only reply with a feeling of unaccountable guilt that "she did not believe she had ever thought about it."

"Well, you will be forced to think of it now!" cried the girl with a sort of hysterical inspiration. "He is going to make his mark if he can only get a hearing! Take my word for it, and I was so proud to think that I could help him!" Excitement had dried Parthenope's tears and hung out red banners on her thin little cheeks; and her small voice had grown big with prophetic triumph; but the key changed suddenly to one of lamentation: "And now the beastly thing will not work!"

There was something so ludicrous in this sudden drop into bathos that Judith had, as on many previous occasions, to put up a hand to hide the quiver of laughter that would visit her really vexed mouth.

CHAPTER XV

"WHAT is wrong with it?" asked Miss Crisp, taking her spectacles out of their case and mounting them on her nose the more efficaciously to spy into the defects of the machine.

"Everything!" replied its owner, with comprehensive despondency. "It is a real swindle. I bought it second-hand from an advertisement." She paused and sighed heavily.

Judith peered at the name. "That's a good make, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is out of order," returned Parthenope, heavily. "It inks from a pad, and I suppose it wants a new pad; at least there seems scarcely any ink left on it." Again she sighed.

"That is very easily remedied, surely, isn't it?"

But Miss Bethell's mind was apparently impervious to this very obvious consolation.

"And meanwhile," she continued dolorously, "I have wasted three to four precious days struggling with it. I thought perhaps it wouldn't matter being rather pale—the vowels were almost invisible—but when he came to-day he was so bitterly disappointed! He tried his best to hide it, but he was!"

Her voice showed symptoms of breaking again, but by a quite sincere effort she got the better of it. "He had expected to find it finished, but I had had to waste so many hours—to throw away so many sheets, that, of course, I got terribly behindhand! I explained that to him, and he said, 'Oh, yes, he perfectly understood,' but I could see by his face——" She broke off.

What she had seen in young Steele's face, while con-

templating her achievement could evidently not be recalled without a fresh opening of the flood-gates.

Her aunt waited till she had partially recovered the power of continuing her tragic tale :

“ He came this evening hoping to find it finished—ready for the printers—and I had to tell him—to show him—he was obliged to own that it would have to be done all over again.”

There was such bitter mortification in the voice that made this statement, coupled with a violent effort to keep it steady, that Miss Crisp was prompted to put the maximum of encouragement into her own tone, as she said :

“ Well, that is no such irreparable misfortune ! With a new pad, or new ink on the old pad—I do not understand much about the matter—it will work all right I suppose, and there is no such excessive hurry about it, is there ? ”

“ Oh, yes, but there is ! That is just it ! There is the worst sting ! He has heard from a friend of his, who is on the committee—I believe the Round Table is run by a committee—asking him to send the MS. up to him at once, that he may look at it, and give his opinion as to its suitability for the paper. It ought to be posted to-morrow, and now !—Even if I sat up all night I could not get it done—not with this beastly thing ! ”

Strong language always sounded odd on Miss Bethell's small lips, and the contrast between the venom of the glance cast by her at the typewriter and its futility again stirred that melancholy mirth which was so familiar an experience to her elderly relation.

Meanwhile in the Steele house, the same subject was engaging the attention of two of the family.

On his return after his precipitate flight from the scene of woe at Grays, Willy Steele had hied, with that swift secrecy frequently employed by him in avoiding his relations, up to his own room. There he had found his sister Laura leaning on the sill of that window, the view from which was always an object of her expressed admiration, though she never would consent to the exchange of rooms

which would have put her in possession of it ; yet could not refrain from a teasing expression of regret at not owning it.

On the present occasion she turned from her contemplation of the moon-silvered firs in the distance to put an eager question to her brother :

“ Well, have you got it ? How has she done it ? Why ” —with an intonation of surprise—“ you have not got it ? ”

The person addressed would undoubtedly have preferred to find his bolt-hole uninvaded ; but as Laura had always constituted herself his favourite sister, and had in the present crisis insisted on forcing the barriers of his literary confidence ; and as he really liked her, with some unavoidable limitations, he felt the impossibility of pointing out to her, as he would not have scrupled to do on an ordinary occasion, that an Englishman’s bed-sitting-room even more than his house, is his castle. So he merely shook his head, and answered laconically : “ Not done ! ”

“ Not *done* ? ” repeated Laura in an accent of extreme astonishment. “ Then what on earth has she been doing all these last days, when she has been mewed up in the study ; and has not allowed herself to take a breath of fresh air ? Why, she has actually not once been inside this house in pursuit of you ! ”

Noticing that a wrinkle of disapproval added itself to the general expression of annoyance in her brother’s face, she added in some haste :

“ I mean—she mostly has some question to put to you, or some little favour to ask of you, hasn’t she ? ”

He did not reply at once ; but as her attitude remained expectant and interrogative, he presently uttered with evident reluctance :

“ The typewriter went wrong, and she has been trying to get it right ! ”

“ Bless my soul, could not she beg, borrow, or steal another ? ” cried Laura, who, though she had her share of her family’s dyspeptic melancholy, was not devoid of common sense.

"I am afraid that she is not very practical, poor little soul!" he answered, embarrassed and unwilling.

There was a short pause, then the girl remarked, in her habitually depressed key:

"I always thought she was a perfect ass!"

But at that he flared up; perhaps the flame of his indignation at this crude appraisal of his admirer's intellect burnt more brightly because in his heart there lurked a treacherous echo of his kinswoman's opinion.

"You have no right to say so!" he said in what sounded to himself a hectoring voice; "a person is not to be dubbed a fool, because she fails to do what she had practically never done before! Typewriting, I suppose, like everything else, requires practice, and she has scarcely had any."

"Then, why in Heaven's name," asked Laura, lifting her eyebrows, "did she undertake it?"

The question was so natural and obvious a one, that at first the person to whom it was addressed had to take refuge in a nonplussed silence. When he did take up his parable it was with a halting tongue; and a flush on his sallow skin.

"It was unwise of her, perhaps, but when you have a very kind heart and want to do a very kind thing, you do not always calculate accurately whether your means are proportioned to your end."

If he had not convinced his auditor, Willy Steele had at least silenced her. She was thinking with stupefaction: "What a change of tune, and what *does* it mean?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE note with which Parthenope accompanied the returned MS. had, as was plainly apparent to its recipient, been freely watered with tears. It contained some very affecting remarks upon her consciousness of general incapacity ; of repentance for having thought it possible that anything *she* attempted could ever be conducted to a happy issue ; and of apology for having put him to the delay and inconvenience which had been the result of the baseless hope of being able to help him.

He would have preferred to keep poor Miss Bethell's laments, with all their embarrassing humility, to himself, but Laura was with him when it was put into his hands. and in the character of favourite sister and confidante, had filched it from him, before he was aware of her predatory intention. She restored it, after two perusals, and remarking drily, " You had really better be careful ! " left the room.

He sat down and took his head in his hand. Yes, Laura was right ; he ought to be careful, but when you lived in such proximity to the source of danger, how were you to avoid it ? He picked up the tear-stained billet, and read it again. If it seriously frightened him. which it undoubtedly did, it also flattered him.

The *bonnes fortunes* of Mr. Steele had not hitherto been numerous ; but here, though he did not call it by that name, was an undoubted one ! Of course, he would not own the embarrassing fact to Laura, nor permit her ever again to suggest it as possible, but to himself it would be useless to deny that the poor little thing was very fond of him, and she could look ripping, though she certainly did not when her eyes were bunged up and her nose incarnadined by weeping as on their last meeting.

He shuddered at the remembrance. Oh, how thankful he had been when Miss Crisp had opened the study door! She was a very decent sort was Miss Crisp.

For an instant the idea that for one moment looked like an inspiration darted across his troubled mind. If he could see "Aunt Judith" alone, mightn't he, with the utmost delicacy, convey to her the true attitude of his feelings; so that thence it might be translated to her niece. But the notion was strangled so instantly after its birth as to be practically stillborn. Indeed, the thought that he had harboured the possibility of warning off any intruder from the private road to his heart made him blush though he was quite alone.

No, he must take Laura's advice and be careful; and then it would be all right. Meanwhile his most urgent need was to get his sister to help him in having his MS. properly and speedily typed. Precious time had already been lost. "Poor little girl! She had made a hash of the job!"

While these reflections were occupying young Steele, the Aunt Judith towards whom his betossed spirit had been turning, and her partner, were meeting in the garden. Both were looking gloomy. It was one of the many days on which the morning papers were full of ill news; and though neither Mrs. Henley or Miss Crisp would for a moment admit, either to each other or anyone else, that any disaster to the British Empire could be aught but unimportant and transient, yet the effect of the ugly tidings told upon the spirits of both.

In addition Mrs. Henley was limping. "Where is Jackson?" she asked in an ill-humoured key, scanning the horizon for the person alluded to.

There was a fell purpose in her voice; which at a happier moment would have moved Miss Crisp to mirth, but she was cross, too, and answered snappishly.

"How do I know? Am I your Jackson's keeper?" Then, ashamed of her own discourtesy, added more mildly: "Do you want him for anything particular?"

"Yes, I do," rejoined the other, in a tremendous voice. "I want to tell him that he is the most consummate ass that God——"

"Oh, but he knows that!" interrupted Judith, matter-of-factly. "You have told him that so often! What has he done now?"

"*What has he done?*" repeated the other, still irefully scanning the horizon for the object of her wrath, "why he has made me break my shin over the large water-pot, which he left in the middle of the walk, and which I fell over in the dusk last evening, when I went out to call Taffy."

"Last evening!" repeated Miss Crisp, in a key of surprise. "Why, you never said anything about it."

"You would not have heard me if I had," replied her companion, with a short laugh. "I do not know what happened to you when you left the room to let Taffy in; but you had not a word to throw to a dog when you came back!"

The cloud which the morning's news had brought to Miss Crisp's brow, grew a shade darker. "No," she said, "I daresay that I had not. I had been having a very painful scene in the study with Parthenope."

The other heaved a rather ostentatious sigh, and asked in a key of impatient patience: "Well, let us hear! What is up with her now?"

For a minute Judith did not reply. Her eyes rested, though without seeing them, on the noble brigades of Darwin tulips, which enriched the morning with the various gaiety of their colours, and held their gallant heads straight and high, in a long rank on each side of the walk on which the two ruffled women were standing. Then her shoulders gave a discouraged shrug.

"I am afraid," she said, "that we must give up our little plan—that it has come to utter grief!"

"How?" There was an interested emphasis on the monosyllable, which showed that for the moment Mrs. Henley had forgotten her shin and Jackson.

"There is really a good deal that is pathetic in the situation, though I do not suppose that you will see it," said Miss Crisp in a tone that conveyed to her friend's ear that she was ready for action, on the well-worn battlefield of her niece's shortcomings. "She was so anxious to help him, and so sanguine of being able to do so, and then"—she lifted her hands dramatically and dropped them again—"it all came to grief! I suppose that you were right, and that she never had learnt to type properly."

"I was sure that she had not," cried the matron, with an accent of triumph which her coadjutor felt to be ungenerous in the face of her own admission.

"Well, however that might be, the poor child made matters worse by a scene! Men hate a scene, and she cried! Oh, she cried, and men hate tears!"

"H'm!" replied the other drily, "do they? And yet they cry a good deal themselves. They always cry when Susannah refuses them! She cannot stop them." Mrs. Henley paused a moment in obviously complacent reflection on the sufferings inflicted by her offspring, then added thoughtfully: "I suppose you are right, however, and that they do hate women's tears; and yet I have known a man brought to the point by a judicious burst of weeping. Ah, there is Jackson!"

Her sentence ended on a note of lurid triumph, and leaving her friend to draw what comfort she could from her reported instance of the efficacy of well-placed tears, she made off in pursuit of her prey with an agility surprising, considering the injury to her shin.

CHAPTER XVII

"WELL, my boy, you are getting on famously!" Sir Edward Cameron said to his son, laying his hand—but carefully, and with a cautious verification of its being the sound one—on the young man's arm.

"I should think I was!" returned he, with what his mother thought an unnecessary emphasis of acquiescence. "When I saw some of those poor fellows yesterday, I felt a perfect fraud."

It was the day after the Convalescent Tea, and it was to some of the more serious cases, among the guests, that the son of the house alluded in a tone of what his female parent regarded as a most misplaced compunction.

"Well, I cannot go quite so far as that!" replied his father with his delightful smile, which, unlike the delightful smiles of a good many male "Strass Engels" was quite as much for home consumption as for "busy mart and crowded street"—"but you certainly can get your elbow a good bit higher up than you could this time last week."

"I can raise it almost as high as my left one," retorted Jack, suiting the action to the word, and trying to elevate his injured joint to the boasted point; but a sudden abandonment of the attempt, coupled with a—to himself—very annoying but inevitable wry face, showed that he had reckoned without his splintered bone; which, though on the mend, was obviously not yet by any means restored—if it ever would be—to its pristine condition. Vexation at his failure combined with pain to make his face pink; and his mother looked at him ruefully.

"More haste worse speed!" she said, shaking her graceful grey head at him. "You had better make up your mind to try and put up with us for a little longer."

She knew that the tinge of reproach in her voice was an injustice to her boy, but it would not be kept out of it.

"Oh, come," remonstrated her husband, with his usual impulse to keep conversation on a plane of pleasantness, when it showed any tendency to get off it—"I think he puts up with us wonderfully well considering, and, after all, there *are* alleviating circumstances! Well, I must be off, there is the car coming round."

He went out of the room with a light laugh at his own allusion, dropping a kiss on his wife's rather downcast brow, and clapping his son on the back as he passed him.

The two who remained behind were silent for a moment or two; then Lady Cameron said falsely.

"I suppose that he meant Nurse Jones."

She did not suppose anything of the sort; nor did her offspring allow her to remain under the belief that she had rightly interpreted Sir Edward's allusion.

"You dear old humbug," he said caressingly, yet as one provoked by an insult to his understanding, "you know perfectly well that he did not mean Nurse Jones. You know as well as I do that he meant Susannah! He is always very decent about Susannah!"

At the implied inference to be drawn from this last sentence the mother flushed faintly.

"Does that mean that I am indecent about her? As to your father, you know what he is in the case of any pretty woman!"

In deadly earnest upon the topic in question as the young man was feeling, he could not help a rather teasing smile.

"I do not know what he might be if he had a free hand," he answered, and they both laughed.

Father, mother and son made such a trio of good comrades that they could afford to laugh at each other.

"I am so decent," Lady Cameron said presently, with a slightly injured stress on the word, "that I am going over this very afternoon to Grays to tender them all my thanks for their exertions yesterday. I must say that they all worked like niggers! Even that little killjoy Parthenope

accompanied the Tommy who played the bones quite nicely."

"It will be of no use your going to-day," replied her son dissuasively. "It is one of her hospital days. She will not be there."

"Oh, but Parthenope never goes to the hospital," rejoined the parent, finding a trifling pleasure in wilfully misunderstanding. "If you remember she broke down at the laundry work months ago."

Her son fixed his agreeable eyes upon her with so mute an upbraiding of her duplicity that she had perforce to abandon it.

"I am not going to visit her in particular, if you can imagine such a thing as possible," she went on. "I am going to pay my tribute of gratitude to the household in general, and besides——" she added in a sort of soliloquy, "I *do* want to alter two or three things in their drawing-room—things that positively cry out to be done."

As Jack was aware of his mother's hobby for reconstructing her acquaintances' surroundings, and was also aware that the metamorphoses wrought by her were not always received by their objects in a thankful spirit, he remained silent.

His mother looked round the room, as if in search of something. "You do not happen to have seen a parcel of patterns from Harvey that came this morning?" she asked. He shook his head. "I seem to have mislaid them," she went on with a tinge of annoyance, "and I wanted to take them to Grays with me this afternoon: there are some very pretty printed linens, which would be just the very thing to re-cover their study chairs with!"

"Are they going to have the study chairs re-covered?" he asked with a very fair show of filial interest, which, indeed, was not all show; for were not those same chairs consecrated by supporting the beautiful and substantial person of his Susannah?

"Yes! No! Yes—at least I hope so!" returned Lady Cameron, in a key of mixed uncertainty and determination.

"It is really impossible that they can go on longer with those old chintzes. They have been calendared and calendared till there is hardly a vestige of colour left in them! And besides, chintz is so obsolete now. None of the London shops stock it."

"Don't they?" returned Jack politely, yet a shade regretfully. He had a kindness for the shabby old roses and dimmed tulips which he had so often seen his mistress' gold head ennobling, by resting against them.

Happily unconscious of her son's vague disapprobation, and firm in her double purpose of gratitude to her friends, and renovation of their furniture, Lady Cameron carried out her intention of visiting the compound house at Grays. She was met on her arrival by the announcement that all the ladies were out; the elders at a Serbian Relief Fund meeting in the Town Hall, and Susannah at the hospital.

As an unimportant afterthought, the servant added that Miss Parthenope might be at home—she was not sure—but she had not seen her go out.

"I will come in on the chance," replied the visitor with alacrity; and, getting out of the motor, her eye brightening at the thought of the prospect of a free field for the exercise of her energies among her hostesses' properties, afforded her by their temporary absence. "Do not trouble to show me in, I know my way," she ended pleasantly—she was always pleasant to servants.

The old-established mature parlourmaid, who was well aware of the visitor's idiosyncrasies, followed her agile movements with a distrustful yet sardonically mirthful expression on her eminently respectful face.

"She won't be best pleased when she finds as they've put 'em h'all back!" she said to herself, as she retired in search of Miss Bethell.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Parthenope entered the drawing-room five minutes later, she found Lady Cameron stationed before the high bookcase, to whose summit she had on her last visit, caused Mrs. Henley's valuable Chinese teapots to be elevated, and from which they were now conspicuously absent.

Miss Bethell's eyes followed the direction taken by the visitor's, and while shaking hands with her, remarked explanatorily:

"You are looking for the powder blue teapots. They have been put back into the cabinet. Sarah brought the step-ladder, and Susannah took them down at once. I do not think that you could have been gone more than five minutes." She paused, then, as Lady Cameron made no reply, beyond getting rather red, went on: "They were annoyed with you for removing them; Mrs. Henley said——"

The speaker broke off; whether deterred from further revelation by the mortified expression of her hearer's face, or by some recollection that her own tendency to repeat was not looked upon with a favourable eye by her family, is uncertain. At all events, it was safer to embark on another topic.

"It was stupid of Sarah not to tell you that they were all out—to give you the trouble of coming in to see only *me*!" she said with that somewhat abject humility which was wont to embarrass those upon whom she practised it.

For an instant, exasperation at the speaker's superfluous candour, prompted Lady Cameron to acquiesce in the stupidity of the parlourmaid's action; but she was a woman of the world; well-mannered, and, in the main,

good-hearted ; so she only said, shaking her head and smiling humorously :

"They are incorrigible ! I shall have to give them up. However, I only tried it as an experiment."

"Personally, I thought that the teapots looked very nice," replied Parthenope, with that tardy compunction for her indiscretion, which, in her case, came—as it invariably came—too late, "but they naturally do not pay any attention to my opinion."

The visitor looked reluctantly at the offender's face. Surely it seemed more pinched and joyless than usual ; the transitory improvement which Sir Edward's lenient eye had noted in it entirely vanished.

"I do not know why they should not," she rejoined kindly, after a moment. "I came to-day to thank you for all you did for us yesterday—you especially for the way in which you accompanied that gunner who played the bones."

At this encomium, a pale gleam of sunshine stole over Miss Bethell's neat features. "There is so little I *can* do," she replied, casting down her eyes.

The kindness of the visitor's manner increased. "You must not run yourself down," she said, encouragingly. "One always finds plenty of people to do that, and if one does not take one's own part, who will ?"

"How true that is !" cried the girl fervently, then added, with diffident appeal : "Do you think that if I thought better of myself other people would think better of me ? But, oh !" —with a remorseful checking of herself —"why am I boring you with my egotism ?"

"You are not boring me," rejoined the other, with hurried good-nature, forgetting the powder blue teapots, and with an impulse of self-reproach for having hitherto done scant justice to the humble little being standing with clasped hands in such a deferential attitude before her. "I am glad to have this opportunity of getting to know you better. When all the others are at home I have not any chance of doing so."

A very faint gleam of resentment, that almost instantly changed into resigned sadness, flashed across Parthenope's brown eyes.

"Yes," she acquiesced quietly, "what a poor figure I cut among them all! It is the last thing that Susannah wishes to do, but she just inevitably blots me out."

As she finished this statement her head sank on her chest with a gesture that expressed hopeless defeat in the battle of life.

Lady Cameron was silent. The truth of Miss Bethell's estimate of herself was so glaring that it would have been futile to deny it. Had she herself ever before to-day cast two consecutive thoughts upon the colourless little "Walking Lady" who formed part of the furniture of Grays? In point of fact, she had never been nearly as interesting as the chairs and tables; since there was no excitement in moving *her* from one room to another.

Encouraged by an unwonted consciousness of interest in her auditor, Parthenope took up her woeful parable. "It is not that I grudge her her wonderful power of attracting everybody's love—at least, I hope not; but it does seem a little hard that while others"—(here a long stifled sigh indicated in what direction the "others" were to be looked for)—"while *others* are famishing for *crumbs*, she should have a perpetual feast spread before her, and not care the least little bit about it."

"But doesn't she?"

There was a sort of uncertain sound in the voice that put the question. Parthenope shook her prettily shaped small head.

"Susannah would do anything for anybody," she answered, with a sort of reluctant shrewdness. "Put herself out of the way—take any amount of trouble to help or oblige man, woman or child, but she does not *care* for anyone. There is no one, about whom she would mind if they died or went away or passed out of her life. She would just say 'Poor darling!' and pass on to some one else. Oh, how often, how deeply, I have envied her!"

The aspiration was uttered in an even more touching key than that of Miss Bethell's former complaints against her Destiny ; but it fell upon deaf ears. The surface compassion evoked by the lamentations of the insignificant little sufferer before her had changed and deepened into an angry pity for her own boy. This then—this heartless cross between a philanthropist and a Lorelei—was the Susannah for whom her adored heroic sorely wounded Jack was eating out his deep simple heart.

She turned and walked to the window, unable, as she felt, to hide the indignant pain which the exegesis of his idol's character, given by one who surely ought to know it thoroughly, had provoked in her. A thready compunctuous voice followed her.

" Oh, what business have I to bore you like this ? Oh, please forgive me ! You were so kind that I took advantage of it ! Oh, here they are, back ! Please do not tell Aunt Judith ! "

As she spoke the door opened, and the two elder ladies entered. At the sight of Lady Cameron's back both exchanged looks of sheepish alarm, but in a moment she had put them at their ease. Exemplifying as often before the triumph of training over nature, she turned, and, holding out a hand to each, cried with a light laugh :

" You deserve a good scolding ! To undo my work the moment that my back was turned. Oh, I am angry with you."

A look of confusion, and an awkward joint murmur that servants were careless, and that the objects in dispute were safer in the cabinet, were all the apology that the culprits could vamp up.

CHAPTER XIX

"I COULD not think what had become of you," Miss Crisp said next morning, opening the door of an unused attic, and immediately beginning to sneeze.

"You had better have remained in ignorance," replied the laughing voice of Susannah, coming from somewhere low down.

Miss Henley was seated on the floor in her blue overall, and the view of her was obscured by a cloud of fluff and feathers, which pervaded the atmosphere.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"You may well ask. I have rummaged out an old feather-bed of mother's—I do not know what she will say to my making so free with it—but I am unpicking it and turning it into pillows. They are rather short of pillows at the hospital."

The elder woman advanced cautiously into the room, and with lifted eyebrows surveyed her junior's industries as well as the grey goose's down, released from its long imprisonment, would let her.

"I shall get eight pillows out of it," Susannah said triumphantly. "I was afraid that it would only run to seven, but I now see that I shall manage to fill eight, if not nine."

She looked up as she spoke; secure of her old comrade's sympathy and interest. Her gold head was snooded with a pale blue kerchief to protect it against the flue; beside her lay the attenuated feather-bed; from an orifice in which she was transferring its contents to a pillow that lay across her knee.

"You will get used to it after a minute or two!" she said reassuringly, fixing her mirthful eyes upon the screwed-

up face of dismay with which Judith was facing the thickened atmosphere. "I made too big a hole. I ought to have made quite a small one, and coaxed the feathers gently into the pillows ; but they will be finished all the sooner, and if you had not poked your old nose where it wasn't wanted you would have spared yourself a painful experience."

The edge of this insult was blunted by the smile of extreme friendliness which accompanied it ; and Miss Crisp beamed all over, as she always did when Susannah "sauced" her.

"I will withdraw it at once," she answered, backing doorwards. "I only came to tell you what I forgot to do last night, that Jack Cameron intends to pay you a visit this morning."

At this piece of information, Miss Henley gently raised her blue-clad shoulders, and heaved a sigh.

"What a bore !" she said, but without the smallest indication of real annoyance. "Well, if he comes you must send him up here ; cart-ropes shall not tear me from my feather-bed before it is completely gutted !"

Her companion gave a little retrospective laugh before her next utterance.

"Poor Lady Cameron ! It was very much *à contre cœur* that she made the announcement ; and her endurance had already been put to a severe trial. Before your mother and I came in she had missed the Chinese teapots from the top of the bookcase, and Parthe had kindly told her that we were annoyed with her for moving them."

A point of bitterness was discernible in the last clause of her sentence ; and the train of thought it led to delayed the speaker's escape from the melancholy conditions that environed her.

"If Parthe is not careful," she continued, sitting down on an old reversed packing-case, "that horrid trick of hers of retailing to people every unpleasant thing she hears said of them will end in her making the neighbourhood too hot, not only for herself, but for us all !"

Susannah was the only person to whom Miss Crisp allowed herself the relief of complaining of her niece, for the reason that Miss Henley was the only person upon whom she could rely not to agree with her. From Susannah's mother a cordial acquiescence in any disparagement of her own young relation was always to be counted on with certainty ; while from the daughter the same serene and lenient response was equally sure to come.

" I would not worry about it if I were you. Everybody knows Parthe and her ways, and I do not think that she can help it."

The consolation might have been thought to be worn threadbare by hard use, but it was uttered with so sanguine a confidence that it never failed to reassure.

" Well, I hope you are right," rejoined the elder woman in a livelier key. " But I shall be truly annoyed if she succeeds in alienating Lady Cameron from us ! Such an old friend, and one who took us up from the first when other people sniffed at us, because we had not brought our marriage lines with us ! " She gave a short laugh, and after a minute added gravely : " Poor woman ! One might allow her her little fads, considering what worries she has ; about her boy with his wounds and his heart-ache."

" A heart-ache is not nearly so bad as a stomach-ache," replied Susannah coarsely ; but, after Miss Crisp had retired, firing a parting shot to the effect that her young friend was not in a position to give an opinion on the subject as she had never suffered but from one, and that the least romantic of the ailments alluded to, the girl sat idle for a few moments, before returning to her fluffy labours.

It was not for long, however, that she was allowed to pursue them in peace. It was almost always impossible for Jack Cameron, in the case of his visits to his lady, not to arrive sooner than he was expected, and stay later. The action showed unwisdom, as the pot whose deferred

boiling entails being watched, is more appreciated than the one which officiously begins to sing before it is expected. A rather hesitating knock at the unwonted door announced his advent not ten minutes after his herald had left the attic.

The "come in" that answered him was not particularly hurried; and the voice that greeted him had a rallying accent.

"Why do you knock? You are like a maid at a lodging-house!"

As in the case of her insults to Miss Crisp, the sting was drawn from this little thrust by the smile that danced in the young eyes, raised from their lowly posture, to her visitor's face.

He did not answer at once. However often he saw her, Susannah always took his breath away for the first moments of their meeting, and this time the disorder of his mind was heightened by verifying that her eyelashes looked more fabulously long than ever owing to the little bits of fluff that adhered to them.

His effort to clasp her hand was gently eluded under the protest that it was full of feathers; and his heart began that downward progress towards his boots which of late had sometimes marked their meetings.

"You will get your lungs full of that beastly stuff," was his first rather grumbling observation after the power of speech had been restored to him.

"Which, in my delicate state of health, is very much to be deprecated!" retorted she; the consciousness of her own triumphant soundness sharpening the ridicule that she never failed to feel and express at his baseless alarm for her. Her raillery cut but did not stop him.

"You laugh!" he said stubbornly. "As to that I do not know what subject in heaven or hell you do not laugh at, but any fool will tell you that to go on swallowing all that chokey stuff for hours together is as dangerous a thing as you can do. You ought at least to wear a respirator!"

She thought his pertinacity tiresome, but as she scarcely ever lost her temper, and as the dogmatism of his tone, coupled with his flagrant juvenility, rather tickled her, she responded, looking very winsome and pleasant.

"My dear boy, there is evidently only one thing to do—
lend me *yours* !"

CHAPTER XX

WHEN she called him "My dear boy," wrath and sorrow always boiled within him. What right had she to assume that detestable pseudo-maternal, elder sister attitude. In point of fact she was not his elder. She was his junior by a full year. Sometimes it struck him as an astonishing fact that he could have endured for twelve vacant months a world in which she was not ! On the present occasion, though he knew that he was not upon a tack that was acceptable to her, he could not help continuing his remonstrances in that school-masterly voice which his beloved never failed to ridicule, and which he himself, in his wiser moments, felt to be ludicrous.

"Your mother has no right to let you expose yourself to such a danger !"

"Fiddlesticks !" cried she good-humouredly. "Mother knows nothing about it ; and if she did her only concern would be for her murdered feather-bed !"

There was a short pause ; of diligently stuffing the seventh pillow case on her part ; of mortification on his ! How little she valued his opinion ! She had not offered him a seat ; which, however, could not be construed into an insult as she had none herself. Without an invitation he brought himself to anchor on the reversed packing-case and there was silence ; broken by Susannah, whom a wide experience of the symptoms which foretell a declaration had made suspicious of preliminary tying of the tongue.

"You are growing down-y too !" she remarked gravely, "in a few minutes nothing short of a vacuum cleaner will purify you !"

But Miss Henley's admirer was not to be so put off. He just lifted an abstracted hand to his close-cropped head to

dislodge the feathers that had settled upon it, and said impressively and growing ominously red :

"If there was anyone who had any influence with you—any—any authority over you——"

"But there isn't!" she broke in joyously, "thank goodness there is not anyone! I am as free as the wind—as the bird on the bough!"—making a glad gesture as of wings with out-flung arms, that for a moment forgot feather-bed and pillow: "by the by"—with a quick and artful change of topic—"does your mother want any spring chickens? I could let her have a nice couple next week!"

Only a moment's respite did this base drop into the prosaic procure for Miss Henley. The packing-case was not a seat that lent itself to the expression of the more dignified emotions; yet there was something not ridiculable in the passionate resolution to take his fence, in despite of all obstacles, that swept over the gallant young face, which glowered down upon the girl at his feet.

"I did not come to talk to you about chickens!"

Susannah sighed. How impossible it was to stop them, when once they were set upon it! She glanced surreptitiously at the watch on her wrist. Was it possible that the luncheon bell might ring deliverance for her, even at this last moment? Alas! there still lacked five long minutes to the half-hour. Sarah was not always punctual, and as far as Susannah's extensive experience went, the fatal words generally shot out with hasty violence at the end! There was then no hope.

"No Dolphin came! No Nereid stirred,
Nor cruel Tom nor Susan heard."

He paused a moment or two to give her the opportunity of asking him what—since he repudiated the suggestion of poultry—had been the motive of his inconveniently timed visit; but she was much too old a hand to fall into so obvious a trap. She expressed no curiosity, but only bent her head over her disagreeable task and sighed again.

The boy's throat felt dry ; and he had a foreboding of failure, yet he went on, with as dogged a determination as that with which he had faced the " Boche " devilries of gas and wire.

" I came——" he said, with the most perfect bald bluntness, that had yet the dignity lent by deadly earnestness, " to ask you to marry me ! You have staved it off a great many times, but I was determined that you should not stave it off to-day ! "

Her answer was to break into the most mirthless laugh that he had ever heard her gay lips give passage to.

" Then you did come to talk about chickens ! " she cried in a last desperate effort to restore the conversation to a plane of jocosity !—" why, you are yourself a chicken. I almost see the shell on your head. "

He had risen from his packing-case and stood before her, defenceless yet dogged ; facing the fire of her cruel raillery ; only the colour ebbing from his tanned face showing how he smarted under it. Stinging as it was—the more stinging because Susannah seldom stung—he did not allow it to stop him, now that he had begun and was in for it ! She knew without seeing—for she had stooped again over her half-filled pillow case, and was feeding it feverishly—that he was only waiting till he could gain mastery over himself to be intelligible and not again ridiculous, to resume the objectionable theme.

Susannah cordially disliked being proposed to. It had no novelty to make it racy. Before her skirts had gained an adult length, stammering schoolboys had threatened suicide before her pinafore ! No answering heat had ever stirred her cool blood to anything but a wondering and thoroughly annoyed pity. Her kind heart was almost as much hurt by the sight and sound of a weeping stuttering degraded man as by a cart-horse with a galled shoulder or a permanently tied-up dog. So she now tried to get ahead of her suitor, with a new speech of an apologetic and deprecating character.

" Don't be angry ! " she said humbly and sweetly and

with a total cessation of the laugh that for the first time in his life he had found jarring ; " it was a stupid joke ! If you are a chicken, we all know "—with an expressive glance at his slung arm—" that you are not chicken-hearted."

But her jeer had cut him too profoundly for even her prettily turned apology to have much efficacy in salving his wound.

" I *am* young ! " he said ; his lips twitching a little, " but nothing can alter the fact that I shall always be a whole year and a fortnight older than you."

The sombre triumph with which he made this statement, and the boyishness of the statement itself as a ground for exultation, might have, under other conditions, moved his light-hearted companion to mirth, but something in the wretchedness yet obstinacy of his look cured her of any other attempt to treat the situation lightly.

" By the almanack," she answered with grave reasonableness, " you certainly are my senior, but you must remember that it is a truism that a woman is really always ten years older than a man of the same age ! I feel and I think—though of course I am not a very good judge of that—that I look ten years older than you ! I am such a great big strapping thing ! "

He did not attempt to contradict her. She was big, with the noble largeness of the Ideal Woman of a poet's dreams, or of the great headless Goddesses of the Parthenon ! Nor did he point to her the fallacy of her reasoning, since he was big too !

" If you were fifty years older than I am, it would not make the smallest difference ! "

At that she lifted her straight golden eyebrows.

" Fifty years ! " she said, with a remonstrance that she had now no difficulty in keeping quite serious, " but I should be seventy-three ! I should be old enough to be *mother's mother* ! "

CHAPTER XXI

THIS interesting arithmetical fact had the effect of momentarily silencing the person at whom it was projected. Jack Cameron had always opposed an outraged denial to the suggestion that at any period of her history Mrs. Henley could have borne the faintest resemblance to her daughter ; and to carry his mind a generation further back to a grandmother, who possibly might have put in an insulting claim to the same distinction of being like her unparalleled descendant, was more than his fortitude could face. Seeing that she had dumbed him, Susannah hastened to press her advantage.

"I am so like mother, that if you look at her you can see exactly what I shall be twenty-five years hence ; and if you add twenty-five more on to that, you will be able to picture me accurately at seventy-three !—no ! do not be angry with me ! I am not thinking of joking. I only want to point out to you how silly it is of you to say that it would make no difference to your feelings for me if I were fifty years older than you !"

"It would not !" he repeated, holding on to his preposterous assertion with the tenacity of a bulldog. "I do not believe that I should see any difference in you ! I have got such a tight hold of *my* picture of you—as you are now—that no later impression could ever rub it out ! Grow as ugly and old as you please !" he cried, flinging the permission at her with a sort of fanatic's exaltation, "and see whether I mind ! It is *you* ! *you* ! *you* !—not your ripping hair, nor even your wonderful cold eyes ! but *you—you* that I shall go on loving till I die ! and please God !" with a reverent stoop of his head and drop of his voice, "after !"

She looked at him wondering and distressed, yet with an embryonic impulse of half or rather quarter comprehending envy. How on earth had he managed to get up on such a plane of what looked like religious madness ? and all about *her* too !

"If you care about me like that," she said, half bewildered and half incredulous, "it would be something worth having !" then poignant alarm at what she saw in his face made her precipitately change the trend of her sentence, "it is splendid, but I—I—it is Greek to me ! and I have nothing—nothing to answer it with !"

She paused ; and he, standing over her, as she sat in her lowly posture on the attic floor, knew that she spoke truth. The eyes into which his, with their desperate longing, plunged, were kind, were regretful for his pain, but cold, cold as frozen blue pools ! There was not in them the faintest hint of a possible response to his passion. She could no more give him a jot or tittle of what he asked for than she could fly over the moon ! He did not need words from her to confirm the knowledge that so icily gripped his heart ; yet they came too.

"I do not think it is in me to care much about anyone," she went on, with a sincere desire to lessen his suffering, by depriving her insensibility to him of anything personal—"no ! not even mother, or dear old Judith ! I cannot even imagine being unhappy for long about any mortal creature ! I am ashamed to own it ; but I am made like that ! I really cannot help it."

There was something humble and apologetic about the tone in which she made her confession ; but there could be no doubt as to its veracity. She had had her gaze lifted to him, but now—whether what she saw there made her too uncomfortable, or for some other reason, she dropped it to her own befeathered lap ; and murmured :

"Sometimes I wish that everybody was like me !—that they would not chuck away such good love upon me—when I cannot give them anything in the least worth having in return !"

He either could not or would not find any words with which to rejoin ; but stood leaning above her in dumb protest, and she began to turn her head distressedly from side to side, as if trying to free it from a most unwelcome yoke.

" Oh, do try to understand ! " she cried, with a slight accent of impatience, " that no one can give what they have not got to give ! It means no slight or insult to you, but I do not love you or anybody else, man or woman ! I do not want to ! Oh ! " with a burst of real enthusiasm, " what a pleasant world it would be if everybody liked everybody else and nobody loved anybody ! "

At that a sort of indignant fire quenched the suffering in his eyes. " I think it would be a rotten place," he said, and his dissent was tremulous in its intensity, " a place that I, for one, should not care to live in ! "

" Wouldn't you really ? " she asked, partly in genuine surprise, and partly because she was thankful for what looked like a loophole of escape towards generalities ; " my ideal state is one where people do everything they can to help each other, and enjoy each other's society ; but never feel as if the sun were gone out because somebody dies or disappears out of their life or likes somebody else better."

For a minute or two he remained still silent, digesting, or trying to digest, her frosty creed, then, " If you can give little," he said humbly, and with no further attempt to contest a statement which was in such cruel disaccord with his own beliefs, " I can get on, on still less ! I can live on very little ! "

She made a restless movement. His persistence in his theme after the extreme lucidity and candour of her exposition made her feel impatient, and to a person who loved to see around her faces made more smiling by her presence and her services, his countenance was not a pleasant subject of contemplation.

" *Very little !* " she repeated, with lifted eyebrows, " why, you want me to *marry* you ! "

"God bless my soul!" cried a voice proceeding from the opened door, "what an atmosphere! What on earth are you and Jack doing up here?"

It was Mrs. Henley, who, advancing through the thickened air to where her daughter sat, continued her ejaculations in an ascending scale!

"What an abominable mess you are making. What is the meaning of it? and—and where did you get that feather-bed from?"

The relief to Susannah's mind afforded by this unexpected interruption was so acute that at once her spirits went up with a bound. Joining her hands as if in prayer, she cried in a gay voice of mock-alarm: "Pardon, my dearest Mamma! I stole it from you."

Mrs. Henley broke into a smile. She was always to be wheedled by the use of the Victorian name which her daughter had now applied to her; and Susannah knew it.

CHAPTER XXII

"WHAT! all my pretty chickens and their dam!"

Miss Crisp uttered this quotation, whose hackneyed quality made it worthy of Parthenope, in her "spouting voice," but with a difference! There was an element of irony in it as applied to the large unwieldy fowls, before whose pens she and Mrs. Henley stood on a morning a few days later.

Both ladies, from different causes, were rather short in the temper, and Mrs. Henley was, in addition, out of breath. She and her gardener, for once united in opinion, had been spending an arduous hour in recapturing some of the heavy hens, who had showed an unexpected activity in flopping over the wire fence, meant to contain their energies, into a neighbouring bed of young cabbages. Jackson had shown his usual futility; and the large birds having invariably succeeded in flapping and sprawling themselves out of his grasp, the brunt of the task had been met by Mrs. Henley, whom, when at length accomplished, it had reduced to a condition of damp gasping, which had precluded even the utterance of any home truths to her assistant.

The first use she had made of her recovered breath was to say something snappy about Parthenope never being in the way when one needed her help; a challenge which had immediately brought Parthenope's aunt into the field. The poetical quotation recorded above proved to her antagonist that she was buckling on her armour.

"If I had to tack tags of poetry to everything I said," retorted Mrs. Henley in a hot spent voice, yet still with acrimony, "I would try to make them a little apter."

She glanced as she spoke at the broad Langshang Matrons, who were expressing their indignation at the

methods taken to restore them to captivity by a chorus of noisy clucks ; and who, though prize animals of their kind, could not be justly described as " pretty chickens."

" If they had been Parthenope's instead of Susannah's you would have wrung their necks for such a crime ! " Miss Crisp rejoined sarcastically.

Then both felt better ; and Judith proceeded to explain that the reason why Parthenope had not responded to the loud cries for her help which had lately rent the air was that she was out of earshot.

" Gone to the Steeles' of course ! "

" Nothing of the kind ! She never goes near the Steeles now ; in point of fact I sent her into the town. I always try now to make some little errand for her, poor child ! "

" She sticks indoors too much ! " replied Mrs. Henley, who, never having regarded a house as anything but a necessary though unwelcome shelter, was apt to ascribe all ailments, of mind or body, to staying inside it, more than the strictest need or most outrageous weather demanded, " she would have a better chance of getting the cobwebs swept out of her silly brain if she took them out of doors."

" Well, she is out now," rejoined Judith, " so you might have spared your *swear words* this time, but no doubt they will come in usefully again ! "

She walked off laughing. Neither of them ever paid any attention to Jackson's presence as a check upon their tongues. He stood by in his usual meek futility, thankful probably in his thick way at having the arrows of his employers' wrath directed at another target than himself ; and as his security disappeared with Miss Crisp, he hastened to offer the cheering and propitiatory remark apropos of the ravaged vegetables : " They'll never be no good again, Miss ! "

Meanwhile Miss Bethell, in apathetic obedience to her aunt's request, was slowly covering the distance between Grays and the town. It was all downhill ; but the girl walked with a lagging step. It was not that she objected to being sent on a trifling errand. She might just as well

be so employed, as in any other way, since nothing of any real importance could ever be entrusted to her. In the excess of her self-depreciation she inwardly wondered that her aunt should think her even capable of buying khaki braid for the strings of respirator bags.

As she thus heavily passed along, she reflected that she had not been able to retain even the company of Taffy ; since he had pretended not to hear her little reproachful pipe exhorting him not to listen to the Aberdeen, who, with his usual deep depravity, was waiting at his own gate to lure him to the woods, and the rabbit-holes. Miss Bethell met several acquaintances, but did not stop to greet them, giving them only her small melancholy bow. Who could wish to delay their business or their pleasure to talk to her ?

In one case, however, an exception was made by her. It was impossible, after her several days' abstinence from the Steele family, to avoid stopping to greet Laura, whom she met, parcel-laden, climbing the hill in the opposite direction to herself. Parthenope was casting over in her troubled thoughts what excuse she should make for her unusual absence from her neighbours' threshold, when Miss Steele saved her the trouble by taking the initiative. It ought to have relieved Parthe's mind that her friend had no intention of reproaching her ; but on the contrary, it only made her feel hurt. Laura was evidently entirely occupied by her own grievances.

"I often wish that we lived in the town !" she said in a complaining voice : "it is such a long pull up ! and if I happen to say I am going down, every member of the family gives me commissions to do for them ; and one never can trust the shops to send up anything. I suppose that all their employés have enlisted."

Miss Bethell replied in a lack-lustre manner that it was very tiresome ! and then the two girls stood and looked at each other.

Both were dark-haired and eyed, but Parthenope's skin had not the swarthy tint which overran the whole Steele

family's countenances, and gave origin to the surmise prevalent among their acquaintances that there was a dab of the tar-brush somewhere about them. Both were depressed and low-toned ; but their depression arose from different causes. Laura Steele did not think ill of herself, but in common with her family had a mean opinion of the general scheme of things ; and of the paltry niche in it which they had been compelled to occupy.

It was with difficulty that Miss Bethell induced her lips to frame the question which was burning to pass them. Only indications on the part of her companion of an intention to readjust her parcels and continue her climb gave Parthenope the needed impetus.

" I hope—I trust that you were able to get your brother's MS. typed properly, and in good time, and that it has gone to the Publishers ? "

The other gave a short dry laugh. " Not only gone, but come back again ! Just our luck ! "

" *Come back !* " repeated Miss Bethell, eyes and mouth opening in aghast surprise. " You do not mean—that the *Round Table* has refused to take it ? "

" That is just what I *do* mean ! " replied Laura ; a mingled feeling of gratitude for the sympathy evidenced, and exasperation at its being so much more intense than was needed, crossing her mind. " It is just our luck ! "

" But I thought," suggested Miss Bethell, in quivering voiced revolt against so unexpected a stroke ; " that he had a friend on the paper who was to get it taken ! "

The unsuccessful author's sister shook her head.

" Well, he either did not try, or he had not as much influence as he thought. The fact remains that it has been refused. It came back last night with a formal note, regretting that their reader had pronounced it unsuitable for the paper."

Parthenope being too much overset by this communication to comment on it at once, she added with a light cynicism : " I do not much believe in the agency of friends in those sort of cases ! Well, I must be going ! "

But her companion laid a small and neatly gloved hand, whose trembling was apparent to them both, in detention on Miss Steele's arm.

"Stay a moment," she said imploringly, "tell me how he bears it?"

Again that mixed feeling of gratitude and of rather contemptuous exasperation at such flagrant confession of unasked-for interest in her brother's affairs, possessed the sister's soul.

"How can I tell?" she asked drily, and with a shrug.

"He has taken his usual measures of self-defence, and locked himself in!" A moment later she added in a kinder tone: "Poor boy! It is a real curse to be as sensitive as he is! He was certainly born with a skin too few!"

CHAPTER XXIII

LUNCHEON at "Grays" was over. It had been a silent repast. Mrs. Henley, whether still spent with her hen hunt or mourning the loss of her young spring cabbage, did not contribute anything to the common fund beyond a criticism of the pudding; which Judith finding just and verifying that it erred on the side of stodginess, acquiesced in, with a mildness which did not always characterise her reception of her partner's utterances on the subject of the *plats* to which she was aware of having given so much conscientious thought. But the pudding was stodgy and she owned it.

"You were wise not to try it!" she said, addressing her niece, whose plate had remained empty throughout the meal; "but why don't you have some *macédoine*?"

The girl shook her head. "I am not hungry!"

It was true. How could a person of any sensibility indulge in the gross pleasures of the table when her heart was swelling with sorrowful sympathy for another's woe? The news that she had brought back from her morning walk locked in her bosom was enough to destroy a stronger appetite than the under-victualised girl could ever boast of! She refused the invitation to join her elders in a taxicab expedition of a calling nature; and having seen them safely off, retired to a position near the gate, whence she could watch the successive exits in different directions of the various members of the Steele family.

They were not a gregarious race; and mostly preferred to take their walks abroad alone, so it occupied some time to account for them all. Laura lagged last, having—as the watcher heard her saying to the parlourmaid—lost Tim the bulldog's muzzle—that muzzle which an indignant

neighbourhood, had insisted on his wearing since his murderous onslaught on the good Taffy's ear. But at last he and his mistress were off to the woods where his ugly face might be freed from its encumbering mask.

The parents and three girls had all, separately, passed out into the highroad, from the precincts of "The Bungalow," by which name the Steeles, in memory of their departed Indian glories, had christened their abode. The coast was clear; and after a few minutes of hesitating delay, Miss Bethell issued from the gate of "Grays," and, after a quick glance to right and left to ensure herself against surprisal by the return for some forgotten article or message of any member of the unsuspecting family, darted into the Bungalow's drive. It was brief; and the hall door stood wide open; as was the hospitable summer custom of house doors in that neighbourhood.

To rush noiselessly through it with an inward benison upon Laura for having removed Tim, and his tell-tale bark, and fly upstairs, was the work of a moment. At the end of that moment she was standing at the door of a bedroom; at the end of another, she was turning the handle and entering. Something inside her told her that if she allowed herself one second for reflection, she would never be able to screw up her courage to the perpetration of such an act of indecorum as she was now committing.

To her surprise the door was unlocked. Once before she had been in Willy Steele's bower, when Laura had, in concession to her ill-concealed longing to realise the scene of his sufferings and his literary achievements, introduced her to his writing-table; and imparted to her the modest secrets of his disguised wash-hand stand, and screened bed!

The unexpectedly unlocked door, yielding to her attack upon it, brought her with startling suddenness face to face with the object of her quest; who was apparently in the act of leaving his fastness; and had only just turned the key that protected his privacy, with that intent. The vehemence of her onslaught almost precipitated his visitor

against him ; and he stepped back with an exclamation that scarcely expressed joy. In fact to a person who heard imperfectly, it might have been taken to rhyme with the word "lamb !"

After that brief utterance he stood still awaiting explanations. These were for the moment not forthcoming. The attainment of her object so much more quickly and easily than she had expected reft for a while Mr. Willy Steele's intending Paraclete utterly of speech. Perhaps also the aghast expression of his countenance contributed to this result. When words came—they had to come since her companion had evidently no intention or perhaps power of producing any—they were of a halting sort.

"I came—I could not help it ! You must forgive me ! but since I met Laura this morning—since she told me—I felt that I must—that I should die if I did not—tell you how grieved I am !"

She remained while speaking standing humbly near the door. Her small thin hands were clasped in a propitiatory attitude and a crystal drop stood in each imploring eye. The conditions were such as showed Parthenope physically at her best, and through his acute fright and sharp vexation, the idea flashed across her victim's mind that—whatever Laura might say to the contrary—she was a pretty little thing and that she must be uncommonly fond of him to do such an extraordinary thing as she was now executing for his sake. He held out his hand to her—how could he help it ?—and answered baldly : "It is very good of you to care !"

She showed no haste to withdraw the hand he had taken ; and it somehow remained fluttering within his, as she took up her lamentation.

"The worst thing for me lies in the fact that I fear I am partly answerable for its being returned. Probably the delay in sending it which was due entirely to my incompetence," here she choked a little, "helped to decide them against taking it !"

She paused ; and withdrew one hand to seek her pocket-

handkerchief, an opportunity of which he instantly availed himself to restore to her the other. The problem that was chiefly occupying his mind was how to get his guest kindly, but firmly, out of the room? and he was asking himself whether, if she would not go, it were more advisable that the door should be open as she had left it behind her, or shut? He wisely decided on the former. His alarms though sincere were, however, traversed and modified by a sense of gratification. Hitherto the fair sex had not shown any great alacrity in compromising itself for his sake, and the sensation was titillating! He must undoubtedly be careful—Laura's warning darted appositely across his memory—but kind too! oh, yes! certainly kind.

So he said, in what he tried to make a tone of gentle fraternal reproach: "Oh, but you must not be morbid! There is not the smallest connection between that paltry two days' delay and the condemnation of my rubbish. They sent it back simply because they thought it bad, and so it is—rank bad! I have been looking over it again," with a hostile glance at his unlucky bantling, whose sheets lay strewn demoralised and dejected over the sofa and floor; "and I cannot imagine how I ever had the cheek to send up such a happy combination of platitudes and crudities!"

He broke into a mortified laugh; and turned his head aside wishing that the sympathy in her moist eyes was less overpowering; yet moved by her crying for him. Tact had never been one of Parthenope's strong points, and her next remark, "You thought differently about it once!" was not marked by that invaluable quality. But love sharpens the instincts in the case of what concerns the Object; and Miss Bethell made an instant plunge to retrieve her blunder.

"I, for one, do not for a moment accept as final the verdict of one paltry newspaper. If you remember 'Jane Eyre' was returned by half a dozen publishers before it was finally accepted!"

At the hopeless flatness of this threadbare theme of consolation to smarting would-be authors, Willy Steele laughed again ; and with a still more humiliated ring in his merriment.

“ Yes,” he said, “ and Milton was paid £5 for ‘ Paradise Lost ! ’ You are quite right. I have every reason to feel encouraged.”

CHAPTER XXIV

AT that Parthenope burst into tears. To risk the reprobation of your family, the shocked incredulity of your acquaintance ; to imperil even your character—in this lurid light did her impulsive action now begin to appear to her—in order to staunch the bleeding wounds in a friend's heart, and to be met with derision, was more than her fortitude could bear. To cover her face with her hands, and through subdued weeping cry : " Oh, why did I come ? My one thought—my one longing was to comfort you ! and now I—I keep saying the wrong thing, and you do nothing but mock at me ! "

Whatever other effect his visitor's tears had upon Mr. Steele, they undoubtedly had that of bringing to a sudden end his ironic mirth.

" Mock at you ! " he repeated, with a shocked intonation, as if all at once struck by the sense of his own ingratitude ; " God forbid ! I have not so many people to care what happens to me, to be likely to insult one who does."

The sentence was eminently unwise ; and would never have passed the censorship of Laura, had it been submitted to her ; but though not unaware of the facility with which Miss Bethell wept, on the present occasion the sight of drops oozing through the little thin fingers—surely thinner than they used to be—played havoc with the young man's resolves to be careful ! Parthenope did not remove the hands in question, but through their screen she wailed—(the rude brothers and sisters from whom Miss Crisp had rescued her ten years ago would have called it whining) :

" Oh ! what a failure I am ! I must have been born

under an unlucky star! nothing that I attempt ever succeeds!"

"We are in the same boat then!" he replied sombrely, but as she still went on sobbing, he added soothingly, "but in your case, I deny it! You wrong yourself; you *do* succeed in throwing yourself into the interests and sorrows of others; and *one* of them at least—is not ungrateful to you!"

But the young mourner sobbed on, and the liquid crystals trickled faster between her slight fingers. On the third finger of her left hand was one paltry ring; and Steele caught himself stupidly wondering who had given it her. After an interval she brought out indistinctly. "*I—I—do not want gratitude!*"

There was a pause; during which the thunder that had been threatening for some time, and had now arrived on the wings of heavy rain, filled the interval with an ominous growling comment.

If not gratitude, what was it that the poor little thing desired? Alas! that was a riddle whose answer was not far to seek! He made the induction as he watched with qualms of compunction at the effect of his own hitherto unexpected power of attraction, the drops stealing ever faster through the poor little hands! What weak little hands! They did not look as if they ever could do, or be expected to do anything! He should like to give them some trifling caress—one of course that would not imply anything serious, but just show goodwill and appreciation of her sympathy; inconveniently acute, as it indisputably was.

The aspiration was diluted by alarm. The rain, now making itself angrily evident against the window panes, would bring the absent members of the family hurrying home, and the tableau presented by himself and his afflicted visitor was not one for which he felt any desire to have an audience. The window was only half shut; and the sky, which had suddenly become as watery as Parthenope, was sending a lashing storm through it. If

he went over and closed it,—an action for which there was pressing need—it might effect a diversion. He did so, making as much noise about it as he could, whether to arouse Miss Bethell from her upset state, or to keep up his own courage is doubtful.

But at his return he found, alas ! the situation unbettered and unchanged and—what was almost worse—he was nearly sure of hearing a sound of voices and footsteps in the entrance hall ! He must get Parthenope away unseen, for she was certainly not fit to be exposed to the gaze of his or anyone else's relations ! But if his ears did not deceive him how on earth was it to be done ? Either imagination or a sense of hearing rendered unusually acute, enabled him to construct the scene going on two storeys below him ; the shaking of wet umbrellas outside the door ; the examination into damage done to raiment ; the hurry to “change” ; and consequent imminent rush upstairs to bedrooms.

If Laura were among the returned members of the family, which was most likely, since thunder and lightning inspired her with a lively terror, she would certainly bounce in upon him, to complain of the storm, and say that it was just like her luck to come in for it ! There was not a second to lose ; and he *must* make up his mind to some action of a drastic nature. But of what kind ? Would remonstrance or coaxing be most likely to succeed ? In the uncertainty and perturbation of his mind, he adopted a middle course—the worst on which he could have hit.

“Oh come !” he began in an agitated and rather scolding voice, “there is really nothing to make such a fuss about !” then as the sobs redoubled, and the steps below became more decidedly audible, desperation gripped him, and seizing her hands in his own, he pulled them from her face, crying in a key of terrified wheedling : “My dear little girl, do stop crying ! there is someone coming ! and I would not hurt your feelings for the world ! and—and it will look so odd.”

The appeal had a different effect from what its maker

had intended. Over the countenance which his violent action had exposed to view stole or rather rushed—for it was instantaneous—a moist irradiation.

“Am I really your dear little girl?” and as if unable to bear the weight of so blissful a possibility, Miss Bethell’s head fell upon the young man’s shoulder.

At the same moment Steele’s worst forebodings were fulfilled for his sister Laura bounced in! It was not the right verb to employ, though he had used it in his thoughts, for the Steeles never did anything so violent as to “bounce”; but by whatever means she had arrived, there she now stood in the doorway with every feature open to its fullest stretch. There was a hideous pause, during which, though he was not richly endowed with a sense of humour, across Mr. Steele’s memory flashed the picture in that early edition of Dickens, which he had revelled in as a schoolboy, of Mrs. Bardell in Mr. Pickwick’s unwilling embrace! Then he awoke to the stunning fact that his sister’s entrance, so far from dissevering from him his conquest, had only made her modestly burrow her face deeper in the sleeve of his tweed jacket.

Then Laura spoke. But could that icy voice, so shocked and superior in its cuttingness, really belong to his ally, his admirer, his—as they had both always tacitly agreed—inferior?

“I am afraid that I am *de trop*!” it said.

CHAPTER XXV

SHE made as though to retire ; but her brother's voice arrested her. "Stay, do not go ! why are you going ? " It was impossible not to recognise the accents of the proverbial drowning man in the appeal ; and it would have needed a harder heart than that of the youngest Miss Steele to resist it. She paused and awaited with an alarming air of judicial fairness, willing to hear what the prisoner at the bar could be found to say in palliation of his crime, her brother's explanation. This, as he miserably felt, would have been easier to render a plausible one if Miss Bethell had not continued to cling to him.

While feeling the warmth of her hot wet face penetrating his coat sleeve, it was difficult to make it appear probable that her visit had only been one of polite condolence on his literary misfortune, and common humanity, heightened by an odd secret vexed pleasure in her contact, forbade his forcibly dislodging her.

"I—I—will tell you—by and by !" He glanced involuntarily at the burden he was supporting with the awkwardness of a neophyte ; and thence with a look of imploring deprecation to Laura.

Whether the lame allusion to a future time when they would be *tête-à-tête* had a mollifying effect upon the person it was addressed to is doubtful, but it had at all events a wholesome one upon Parthenope. She raised her face—blush-dyed and transfigured ; and separating herself from the young man, tottered with both arms outstretched towards the intruder.

"Don't—be—very angry with—with us !" she cried tremulously, yet all in a glow. . . .

Half an hour later, the brother and sister were enjoying

that *tête-à-tête* which had been held out by Willy as the occasion for clearing up the "situation." He had been escorting Parthenope to her door; and his sister had intercepted him on his return, and now trod with him the dripping garden paths—the storm being over.

"Well you *have* done it!" was her first tragic greeting.

As he received it in silence, she continued, with a smouldering heat of indignation.

"I suppose that she now considers herself engaged to you?" His head made a gesture of assent in which his tongue took no part. "I am sure that you have not the slightest desire to marry her!" proceeded she, probing the wound with all a sister's brutal directness.

"You haven't the smallest right to say so!"

"Haven't I," with a kind of acrid triumph. "How long is it since you set me to watch so that you might slip out before she got hold of you? Since you quoted Lord By——"

"Stop!" he said authoritatively, "oh, how bitterly you make me rue having ever confided any of my thoughts or feelings to you!"

The girl's lips twitched. She was really fond of her brother. "But you did," she cried, "you cannot deny that those were your feelings a very short time ago! Oh! my poor dear boy," with a burst of compassionate emotion, "what could you have said to her to make her take such a ridiculous idea into her head? Do tell me what you said!"

No answer. What had he said, in point of fact? "My dear little girl, don't cry! I would not hurt your feelings for worlds!" Is it possible that that was all?—all the foundation on which the "dear little girl" had built her towering structure. Could his memory have played him false? Had his tongue, without his knowledge, betrayed him into some more compromising appeal than the innocent ones which his agitated recollection had called up? But no! strain it as he would, memory yielded nothing but the trumpery phrases which it had already disgorged. The poor little thing had evidently entirely misunderstood

him ! She had judged his heart by her own little warm one—how warm it was her very mistake showed ! Her feelings had carried her away. How could he ever have the brutality to undeceive her ?

As he stood distraught with this chain of thoughts racing through his brain, his sister continued to gaze at him with anxiety awaiting an answer to her unanswerable—had she known it—question. It was so slow in coming that her patience gave out.

In the excitement of the crisis they had paused in their walk ; and now stood still by a rather anæmic bed of Alpine anemones. The Steeles' garden was not nearly so successful as that of Grays, since they always tried to make things grow in it which would not ; acquiescing in their failures with a phrase which figured largely in the family vocabulary ; and relieved them from the necessity of trying to correct their errors. "It is Kismet !"

Tired of waiting for an answer to her question Laura repeated it in a slightly varied form, and with a strong inducement attached.

"If you would tell me exactly how you stood, we might perhaps manage to rescue you even yet !"

The phrase stung him. Rescue him ! What an invertebrate creature he must appear to the person who ought to have known him best for her to think such a word applicable to the case ! With what a contemptible incapacity for managing his own affairs was his sister crediting him !

A rush of colour to his face, and a tone which unmistakably implied a wish to put Miss Laura in her place, proved to that young lady, that all that she so far had succeeded in accomplishing was setting her brother's back up !

"I am of course very grateful to you for your kind offer of assistance, but if I needed rescue, which I do not, I should be quite capable of managing it off my own bat !"

The speech was snubby ; but Laura though a gloomy was not an ill-tempered girl, and compassion for the person

who uttered it too entirely swayed her soul for there to be any room for resentment in it.

"*I cannot* understand how it happened!" she ejaculated presently in a key of profound incredulity. "How did she come to be in your bedroom? Did you invite her in?"

The already deepish pink that pervaded Willy's countenance grew deeper.

"Of course it never occurred to her that it was that!" he retorted hotly, "she looked upon it as what it is—my sitting-room—the only place which I have to receive my friends in!"

Miss Steele shook her head, stubbornly. "She knew perfectly well that it was your bedroom! I took her in there one day when you were out; and showed her your wash-hand stand and your boots!"

Neither of them was in the least conscious of any bathos in this exogesis, but the man's blush faded into an angry white.

"What are you driving at? Are you trying to take away her character simply because she obeyed an impulse to offer her sympathy to one who, as her instinct tells her, does not get too much of it at home!"

Tears threatened to invade Laura's eyes; but she drove them back. Gross as was the injustice to which she was being subjected she would not cry. Parthenope was always crying! No! She would not cry.

"*I have always sympathised with you!*" she answered quietly, "I was almost as much cut up as you were when the MS. came back; but you cannot expect me to sympathise with you now! The whole thing is too incredible!"

"*Incredible?*" repeated he, affronted, "what is there *incredible*, if I have—have—taken a fancy to a girl who in many respects is—is decidedly above the average!"

In his own ears his Apologia sounded hideously lame; and his statement of his conquest's attributes lamentably lukewarm. In a second his sister had pounced upon its weakest point.

“ But you *haven't!* ” she cried, with lurid triumph ; “ to say so, is to put the saddle on the wrong horse !—you haven't taken a fancy to her ; but she has taken a fancy to you ! She has thrown herself at your head ! and you have borne it tamely ; you have let her ! ”

Having fulminated this thunderbolt, Miss Laura Steele, contrary to her resolution, dissolved in tears.

CHAPTER XXVI

"BACK already?" in a tone of pleased surprise was the greeting of Lady Cameron to her son as he entered the dining-room to find her at her lonely luncheon, on his return, fasting, from helping or hindering Susannah with her pillow-making industry; "I heard the motor horn, but could not believe it was you."

"Couldn't you?"

She stopped him, as he was about to sit down beside her, and bade him ring for more food—(she herself had been pasturing with war-time frugality on one scrambled egg and a cup of coffee)—seeing that he obviously could not have had any at Grays. She was in the act of adding a pungent rider on the inhospitality of the inhabitants, when he interrupted her.

"They did ask me! The old girls both pressed me!"

"And the young one—the only young one that mattered did not?"

He shook his head. She did not say anything either way. There was a slight pause.

"I believe," Lady Cameron began presently, while her always bright eye grew brighter, as at some pleasant inward suggestion, "that you remembered that your poor doddering old mother would be alone and you hurried back to keep her company."

Cameron laid his one serviceable hand on hers—he had by this time seated himself at the table beside her—and answered:

"No, dear, I always like your company—at least *almost* always; but to-day I never thought about your being alone! I was as selfish as I am afraid I almost always am!—as you and the governor"—with an affec-

tionate bit of a laugh—"have been so brilliantly successful in making me. I came home because—because I thought that I had rather!"

The small elation had died out of the mother's face; but she made no comment; waiting for the elucidation that she knew would come. Hadn't he always told her of his troubles, with absolute confidence in her sympathy, until her attitude towards this last immeasurably greatest one had weakened his faith in her, as an unfailing fount of help and consolation. Now he did not meet her eyes and his fingers fidgeted with the forks on the tablecloth before him.

"I had had," he spoke the words in a lowered voice, "what was not exactly a whet to appetite!"

Lady Cameron's face assumed an expression that might be said to resemble that of an angry war-horse.

"Do you mean to say that——" Words failed her to complete the sentence.

"Yes!" he answered, replying to the truncated question as if it had been a perfectly rounded one: "I asked her to marry me; and she—she—did not *see her way to it*!"

At the gallant effort to give a quasi-comic turn to the tale of his defeat, the mother's heart swelled high; as did her wrath.

"Do you mean to say that she—she *refused* you?"

The question was put in a tone of such shocked incredulity, as of one unwillingly listening to a blasphemy, that her son unexpectedly laughed. It was only with the "end of his teeth" as the French say; but even now his mother's overweening estimate of the homage due from the whole female sex to his fascinations moved him to vexed mirth.

"It does seem incredible that she should be so blind to her own advantage, doesn't it? but the fact remains that she is!"

Lady Cameron was too refined to snort; but there is no other verb that could so well translate her sensations on

the receipt of this statement. It was due to one of the strongest efforts of self-control that she had ever practised, that she was able to refrain from expressing overtly to her son the opinion that of all the acts of impudent folly which she had ever heard, that recorded by him was the crowning one ! All that passed her lips in a triumph of reticence were three words of emphatic acquiescence in his ironical comment on his rejection. "*It does indeed !*"

The entrance of the butler with some improvised luncheon here effected a temporary diversion ; an interval during which the mother's wrath seethed inwardly ; and the son wondered how he should be able to get down enough food to satisfy his parent's exacting tenderness ; since Susannah had indeed taken away his appetite.

When they were again alone, and the young man had gulped down some mouthfuls of roast mutton with as much gusto as he could assume, Lady Cameron resumed the conversation in a praiseworthily governed key ; praiseworthily considering the cauldron that was boiling within her.

" Did she give any reason ! "

He laid down his knife and fork with an alacrity that distressed his companion. "*Any reason !*" he repeated, with a valiant but rather painful attempt at lightness. " oh ! I suppose the usual one in these cases ! she hasn't any use for me ! "

But at that, the cauldron boiled over. "*No use for you !*" the accent connoted bottomless indignation. " I like her impudence ! Why she ought to have been jumping out of her skin with elation at having an honour so far above anything she could expect, or deserve offered her ! "

Jack leaned back in his chair ; his foot drummed on the floor, and a fold expressive of deep and helpless annoyance, appeared between his brows. The person who loved him best in the world was adding very sensibly to his burden. But he was always nice to his mother, even when she stroked his fur so grievously the wrong way as she was doing now ; and when he spoke it was quite gently :

"You dear old monomaniac, don't you think that you are a little unreasonable? You never wanted her to marry me, and now that she is playing into your hands you are angry with her!"

A hot angry flush had invaded Lady Cameron's whole pale face.

"It is true that I didn't want her to marry you——" she answered, "why should I? but never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that she would not be willing—be *more* than willing to marry you!"

This was not absolutely true; since suspicion that Miss Henley was not nearly so much in love with her son as he was with her had ere this mixed indignantly and contradictorily with earnest hopes that she was not. Jack gave a small and rather hopeless shrug.

"I know that you mean well," he said, nor was he successful—perhaps he did not try very hard—in keeping the acute irritation produced in him by his parent's line of consolation out of his voice, "but doesn't it strike you that I have already had a bad enough knock without your making it worse?"

The reproach cut the person to whom it was addressed, but without sensibly changing the trend of her discourse. She was hurting her boy—yes! but it was for his good, and what a relief it was to speak out at last!

"In point of fact," she said, suppressing the pang that his appeal had caused her and speaking with a not very well done air of candour and impartiality, "that it is not *in* her to care for anybody! I suppose that she cannot help it! I have always had a suspicion of it; and a person who ought to know her well, Parthenope Bethell—confirmed me in the idea, when I had a few words of talk with her the other day. She told me plainly as an incontrovertible fact that Susannah does not care for *anybody*; that she is perfectly indifferent as to whether anybody lives or dies, so that she herself keeps well and cheerful! Parthenope was complaining how hard it was that everything should be showered upon a person who never even

took the trouble to stoop and pick it up ! She said that without intending it, Susannah absolutely snuffed *her* out ! ”

Then noting the look of infuriated impatience that was invading her boy's countenance, she added : “ But that is neither here nor there ; and I am sure I do not care whether that little whining creature is snuffed out or not ! ”

“ Parthenope is a spiteful little cat ! ” rejoined her son vigorously ; his patience sloughing off him like a snake's skin ; “ and I should like to wring her neck ! ”

CHAPTER XXVII

"It is Kismet!" Mr. Steele *père* was saying, slightly raising his shoulders, and shaking his white-sprinkled black head. It was from him that his brood had inherited their duskiness; as also their lean smallness. Both parents had contributed to the family low tone, though there was an impression current among their acquaintances that Mr. Steele's melancholy was liver-born; while Mrs. Steele's was attributable to her past—that past for the rumour of whose rather high-coloured complexion there was absolutely no foundation in solid fact. But despite this the neighbourhood went on believing vaguely that the poor lady had been "gay"; though nobody suspected her of any present inclination to kick up her heels!

At the present moment the water stood in her large eyes; and her voice was not expressive of exultation at the tidings which her daughter Laura had just sprung upon her parents and her two elder sisters. They were all assembled in the drawing-room after dinner—the messenger of evil having conceded to her brother's request that she would defer throwing her bomb till he was well out of the way.

The drawing-room would have been prettier if it had been less Indian; but to its inhabitants, it recalled former glories, and was consequently dear! A bead *Purdah* hung over the door; specimens of Benares and Kashmir work encumbered the tables; and none of them looked at home.

Mr. Steele was smoking a cigarette, which he had just taken out of his mouth to emit his favourite fatalistic axiom. Mrs. Steele was crying. Daisy was holding in her hand a little frame on which she had been winding bandages before the blow fell; and Rosamund was reclining on a

sofa doing nothing. She never did anything if she could help it, having brought home with her from the East a double portion of Oriental indolence ! Laura with hot cheeks, unwontedly blazing, and a general sense of dismal importance, had been breaking the news to her kin ; and now stood—she was too agitated to sit—awaiting the effect of her explosive. It was tamer than she had expected.

“ I suppose that it might have been worse ! ” was the comment with which Daisy followed up her father’s resigned if not exhilarating utterance ; she added hesitatingly as if advancing a statement which was not likely to be accepted without challenge, “ and really and truly, once or twice I have seen her look quite good-looking ! ”

She stopped. No other claim in behalf of Miss Bethell’s desirability as an in-law could she conscientiously advance. Rosamund said nothing. It was so much less trouble to be silent ; and let other people talk !

“ I should not have chosen her myself ! ” the father of the family rejoined, in answer to his second daughter’s parsimonious encomium on their future relation ; then, added, as if determined not to be outdone by her in liberality of judgment, “ but as the French say : ‘ All tastes are respectable,’ and we must remember that poor Willy has some disabilities in the marriage market—his limp and so forth.”

Whether or not poor Mrs. Steele took these allusions to her son’s physical drawbacks as reflections on herself, her weeping, which had hitherto been noiseless, allowed itself the luxury of a modest sob. The sound seemed to stimulate her youngest daughter to a still more urgent prosecution of her campaign.

“ But he *did* not choose her—she chose him ! ” cried the girl in a dolorous heat of revolt against her family’s lethargy, “ he had as little intention of marrying her as you have ! ”

Here Mr. Steele interposed a slight sarcastic protest to the effect that on the present occasion he felt no temptation to be bigamous. Her father’s cool cynicism only stimulated Willy’s champion to further effort.

"Is it possible that he is to be sacrificed to an entire mistake—a really grotesque mistake?" she asked, addressing this question with even augmented emphasis to the Head of the Family; "he is too generous to explain to her that she had utterly misunderstood him—but surely it is your or mother's plain duty to undeceive her!"

Her father glanced at her with a rather amused but somewhat ironic gleam out of his dark eye. "I do not pretend to say what your mother's duty is or is not," he replied, with just an indication of a smile; "but I am quite sure that it is not mine to explain away the compromising utterances of any of my children! I have always told you that whatever scrapes any of you get into, you must be so good as to get out of them again, without any assistance from me!"

So saying, and replacing his cigarette in his mouth, he left the room with a leisurely step.

After his exit the four women whom he left behind remained for a few moments silent. Mrs. Steele was the first to speak.

"He dislikes it quite as much as we do!" she said apologetically for her departed lord, "but he always has a different way from other people of showing things! and he has a good deal to try him, one way or another."

There was always a good deal of sighing done in the Steele family. Rosamund indeed did not sigh. The sofa was comfortable; and through her mind passed a drowsy wonder that anybody should think it worth while to make such a fuss about anything.

"Father and Willy have not much in common!" remarked Daisy dispassionately, resuming the winding of her bandage.

There was not anything that was depreciating of either of the persons mentioned in this tepid statement; but Mrs. Steele's next observation implied that she divined a reproach in it.

"He is an excellent father to you all!" she said in affectionate if rather feeble championship of her lord, a

championship which would have put to shame the supporters of the theory of her lurid past, "nobody can say that he is not an excellent father to you all."

Nobody had said it ; but as neither did anybody care to point this out, there was silence. Presently the second Miss Steele spoke again.

"It would have been better if it had been Susannah !"

Laura shook her head despondently. "He never looks at Susannah !"

Her sister laughed a little. "Well as to that I will do him the justice to say that he never looked at Parthenope until she compelled him to ! You *have* to look at a person who never for one moment stops looking at you !"

Mrs. Steele's pensive head made a sign of melancholy acquiescence. "It has been a perfect siege !" she said in a small voice.

Then Rosamund made her first contribution to the discussion. "I cannot understand why you are all fretting yourselves to death about it ? After all, it is their own concern."

Miss Steele spoke so seldom that her utterances were generally treated by her family with a deference which they never deserved. On the present occasion her mother and sister replied that there was certainly something in that, and Laura in useless resentment of the lukewarmness of her relations held her tongue. After an interval of depressed rumination Mrs. Steele resumed the subject.

"I wonder if it will be soon ?"

"There would be a better chance of getting him out of it if it could be put off for a bit !" replied Daisy, "he never could stand her for long, but I am afraid that her people know that, and will hurry it on ! They must be so glad to get rid of her !"

"I don't think that they have had any hand in her indecent pursuit of him !" Mrs. Steele rejoined, searching for her handkerchief, which she had—as she often did with the minor articles of her toilette—mis-laid ; "in fact I have often seen Miss Crisp look thoroughly annoyed with

her, when she was specially—what shall I say—*demonstrative* ! ”

“ It is a burning shame that such things should be allowed ! ” commented her youngest daughter in a low key—no Steele was ever loud !—of profoundest revolt against a social scheme which could admit the possibility of such a—rape was not the word that would have occurred to her ; but it represented the thought in her mind.

“ It is just our luck ! ” mourned Mrs. Steele and her daughters sighed acquiescence, “ just our luck ! ”

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN oh ! how different a spirit was the news of Miss Bethell's engagement received at the house on the other side of the road. The tidings were communicated by the girl herself, and with the least possible delay to her housemates. She had tried to persuade her fiancé—(was he really that, he asked himself in a dazed way as he recrossed the road on his return to the Bungalow)—to join her in imparting the great news ; but here he showed a firmness which would have stood him in more valuable stead earlier in the day.

" No ! No ! " he replied precipitately, when she made the proposition, " I—I will leave it to you ! You will do it so much more—so much better than I should ! Mrs. Henley always makes me feel *such* an ass ! and perhaps they—they—won't approve."

The last clause was not uttered, it must be confessed, with any great conviction. His fair one replied with a sweet docility :

" It shall be just as you please."

He thought it a pretty attitude towards himself ; and as far as the welter of astonishment at his situation, in his own mind would let him, liked it. So the new-made betrothed had to face the music alone.

She did not share her Willy's faintly expressed modest doubts as to his acceptability ; so that there was really nothing to take off from the impatient joy with which she awaited the return of her elders to proclaim her Evangel ! They were both in very good tune when they arrived ; Miss Crisp had found links of pleasant old acquaintance with the General's wife upon whom they had been making a first call ; and Mrs. Henley had been put into spirits by the brilliant success of a wordy war she had had

with the conductor of the Aldershot motor-bus. They had had tea with the General-ess; and Mrs. Henley was on the point of stepping out into the rain-freshened garden on the track of Jackson's latest iniquity.

Jackson, who, had she known it, had been enjoying the truce of God in the kitchen, when Parthenope's voice arrested her.

"Would you mind—I shall not detain you long—but I have a piece of news to tell you both."

The person addressed, paused, with one golosh on, and the other off, in an attitude of expectation. Parthenope's whiny-piney voice always got on her nerves, but there was no whine in it now; on the contrary, an absolutely unfamiliar note of trembling triumph.

"I hope that you will both think it good!" There was a palpitating silence. The mouths of both the elders half opened, and their ears cocked in eager attention. A hope almost too bright to be entertained dawned in Judith's mind. Their young companion did not keep them long in suspense. "Willy Steele and I are engaged!"

The announcement was simple and modest; but neither simplicity nor modesty could avail to hide the triumphant joy they sought to veil. Mrs. Henley's mouth, from being ajar, became almost wide open!

"Do you mean to say," she enquired bluntly, "that he has actually asked you in so many words to marry him?"

The question was uncomfortably phrased; and for a moment the girl hesitated. "It was only to-day that we came to a complete understanding!" She cast down her eyes.

For a moment or two longer Miss Crisp remained silent; then she stepped nearer to her niece, and gripped one of her pendant hands.

"It is good news indeed!" she cried heartily, "and I am truly glad of it. You are sure that it is quite, quite settled?" She was vexed with herself for the faint tinge of incredulity which she heard in her own voice; all the

more as she was conscious of having resented a few minutes earlier the more patent unbelief which had characterised Mrs. Henley's utterance. She had indeed made a mental note that she would be even with her old friend for her unflattering deficit in faith, ere many hours were over.

"I do not think that there is any mistake!" Miss Bethell replied, with meek triumph. Despite its meekness the assurance was given with so much confidence that the clouds of doubt melted away from the minds of both her seniors—they were only too anxious to believe—and the sun of Parthenope's glory blazed unquestioned in the heavens.

"Well, my dear," Mrs. Henley cried, following her partner's example and shaking the bride-elect's other hand with hearty goodwill, "I wish you joy most sincerely, at least I should do, if I ever thought going to be married a fitting subject for congratulation to anyone!"

"I don't know what I have done to deserve such happiness!" answered Parthenope, with her wonted originality, and then seeing, through the open door, Susannah freed at last from her feather-bed making chicken-pens-ward with a bucket on her arm, she gave utterance to the ejaculation, "Oh, I must go and tell Sue! I should never forgive myself if I let her hear my news from anyone else first!"

She ran away, light as zephyr, and the two elderly women remained confronting one another.

"So she really has pulled it off!" Mrs. Henley ejaculated, in a key of undisguised and unbridled wonder; "I never believed that she would, did you?"

Judith hesitated. She would dearly have liked to assure her unbelieving Harriet, that no doubt as to Willy Steele's willingness to lay himself, his limp, his astigmatic eyes and artificial teeth at her niece's feet had ever crossed her mind. But veracity forbade.

"I do not know why you should think it so incredible that the poor child should inspire a liking in any man," she replied, evading the too-searching query, and looking

affronted. "Many less attractive women have inspired very serious attachments."

"Don't pick a quarrel with me!" rejoined the other good-humouredly, "I am only too glad to believe it!" Then she broke into a laugh. "Poor girl! she did look pleased! I suppose when you are not used to that sort of thing—when it is your first experience of the kind, it does elate you."

The light of battle kindled in Judith Crisp's eye. Had she upheld the standard of Parthenope through all these rolling years, only to let that rather dismal pennon drop just when a victorious breeze was beginning to wave it?

"As to elation," she said, slightly reddening, and with an offended emphasis upon the word, "anyone but you would have thought that she made her little announcement quite nicely and naturally."

"I am sure she did!" acquiesced Mrs. Henley, who was in too high good-humour to be easily roused to battle. Then she began to laugh again as at an irresistibly droll reminiscence, "but she did look pleased, poor soul! Like a shipwrecked mariner who has just clutched a rock!"

At that the shipwrecked mariner's aunt walked away.

CHAPTER XXIX

"I REALLY owe it all to you!" Parthenope cried in an irrepressible burst of joyous gratitude; enveloping her aunt's waist with both arms; and murmuring this acknowledgment of obligation against her cheek.

In consideration of the circumstances of the case Miss Crisp had hitherto submitted with the meekness of a Paschal Lamb to these blandishments; though she was not fond of being enveloped or embraced.

"No one can wish to kiss an old woman for his or her own pleasure!" she would say in her most trenchant voice; "and if they do it with the idea of gratifying the old woman, in my case at least they labour under a misconception!" Yet she was glad when Susannah's cool red lips dropped a friendly peck upon her face.

Miss Bethell and her aunt were in the schoolroom; and it seemed to the latter that she had been encircled by a pair of thin chiffon-clad arms—it was after dinner—for fully half an hour, when the unaffected surprise caused in her by Parthenope's tribute gave her an excuse for withdrawal.

"I!" she cried in startled disclaimer, "my dear child, what are you talking about? what have I to do with it beyond wishing you——" *success* she was going to say, but discarded the word at the last moment, as giving an unflattering impression of effort; and substituted rather lamely, "good luck!"

"But I *do* owe it to you!" replied Parthenope stoutly, "though you are too generous to let me tell you so! If you had not rescued me from my wretched travesty of a home ten years ago, I should never have had the chance of meeting Willy! We should have gone through the world

each on our lonely way, without knowing of one another's existence ! " She gave a little shudder at the idea of the peril that had been avoided.

" Well, of course, if you put it in that way——" replied Judith doubtfully.

" But that is not all—not nearly all ! " continued the girl, warming with her theme ; " since you took me out of my miserable surroundings, how much, how inestimably much you have done for me ! Haven't you educated me and imbued me with your own tastes—your love of poetry—of letters ? Deny it as you will," with a fine burst of enthusiasm, "*whatever I am*, I owe it to you ! "

As she finished, she sketched a gesture as of an intended encirclement of her benefactress ; but the latter stepping back, and uttering a species of gasp of astonishment evaded it. Was this the crushed, painfully humble, self-diffident creature, whose almost abject disposition to lie down on the earth and invite the whole of Creation to trample over her, Miss Crisp had for a whole weary decade been combatting ? *Whatever I am !* What in Heaven's name was she ? The inclination to respond to her young relation's tirade by a smart snub was so overpowering, that she took herself seriously in hand for a minute or two, before trusting herself to speak, and even when she did, she was aware that her speech had a discouraging ring.

" I do not think I quite know what you are ! " she replied at last in a constrained voice ; " but whatever it is, I don't think that I have had much hand in effecting it ; anyhow," forcing herself to adopt a key of greater warmth, " I am truly glad to see you so—happy ! "

The word *elated* almost forced itself across her lips. Angry as she had been with Harriet for employing it, there certainly was a terrible aptitude in it ! Yes, Parthenope was dreadfully, humiliatingly elated ! It took all Susannah's bright sympathy and unaffected rejoicing (with no *arrière-pensée* of sarcasm) in the good tidings to restore the balance of Judith's chafed mind.

"This is first-rate news!" she exclaimed, with her breezy joyousness, "Parthe has just told me! I am not surprised! I saw it with my prophetic eye—I think I have a great flair for love affairs! as far back as that Sunday supper, when I made my crack salad, and he didn't even know that he was eating it! How did Mother take it? Of course," laughing, "she advised Parthe to get out of it, but I hope that she wasn't *too* uncivil to the Holy Estate of Matrimony!"

"She was fairly kind!" answered Judith dubiously, "but she needn't have rubbed into me quite so hard that Parthenope was indecently elated!"

"Mother does not always choose her words very happily," replied Susannah apologetically. "Of course Parthe is pleased, if you have fixed your affections upon anyone and there has been a hitch and then it has all come right, you are naturally pleased! if she had affected indifference, we shouldn't have believed her, should we?"

There was a mirthful glint in both eye and mouth as Miss Henley put this very supererogatory question; and Miss Crisp dissolved into laughter. Susannah joined in; and stood swinging her empty bucket with a few bits of goose down still adhering to her hair, and looking untidy, and rather roguish. The elder woman lapsed quickly back into gravity.

"I wonder," she said looking reflectively at her young companion, "whether there will ever come a day when you will be elated for a like cause?"

Susannah was almost universally toierant; but she always parried as distasteful any allusion to the state of her own affections or no affections. So she now broke into evasive song.

"When all the Seas run dry, Lassie," she carolled.

"I wish," pursued Judith, with apparent irrelevance, "that Jack Cameron would not come here in the forenoon; it is vexatious to have his appetite taken away, when he has only just begun to pick it up again!"

"I suppose that he got his mouth full of feathers ! you saw yourself what an atmosphere it was !" retorted the girl jocosely ; but she did not look comfortable.

Her old friend eyed her with affectionate upbraiding.

"La belle Dame sans merci," she said.

"Now if I were mother, I should be off like a shot !" cried Susannah, seizing with glaring avidity this opportunity of effecting a diversion, "since you are at your pestilent trick of quoting poetry ! but I can stand fire better than she !" Rather hastily she wrenched the conversation back to the original theme. "I hope that Willy's people will be nice about it ! There is no earthly reason why they shouldn't."

"I should say that the attractions of bride and bridegroom were about evenly balanced !" was the other's caustic response.

She was rather apt to belittle her niece to her present companion, in the unconscious hope of being contradicted—a hope that was always divined and almost always fulfilled ; nor was Susannah wanting on this occasion ; though her assertion of the superiority of Parthenope's charms was coupled with a good-natured tribute to Willy's latent possibilities.

This sent Miss Crisp on her way rejoicing. It was in a very cheerful voice—the two women were now walking home side by side through the young pea rows and asparagus beds of the kitchen garden—that she resumed.

"It will cause no real obstacle, even if they do object, as he is quite independent financially."

"Yes, that is a delightful feature," assented Susannah eagerly ; "no wrangling over settlements or lawyers' delays ! It is too amusing," with a chuckle, "to think of Parthe with a house of her own ! I do hope that she will let me help her to choose the carpets ! Isn't it a solemn thought"—shoving her disengaged arm with an uncere- monious certainty of the action being welcome under her senior's,—“that Parthe will henceforth be able to chaperone *you* and *me* !”

CHAPTER XXX

WHITSUNTIDE, of all the annual holidays dearest to the tripper's heart. It was Whit-Sunday ; and a very respectable proportion of the Steele family were going to church. They were fairly regular attendants at public worship ; though it perhaps did not take a very large obstacle to divert them from the track. They liked to go separately ; to different churches preferably ; if not to different parts of the same church ; and there was a variety of tastes in the matter of services ; the elders leaning towards the morning, and the younger—all but Rosamund—to the evening ones. For Rosamund church-going implied too much getting up and sitting down again, standing and kneeling ! So she was somewhat of an abstainer. No one remonstrated with her. The Steeles never remonstrated with each other upon any of their actions or shortcomings ; which perhaps accounted for the sort of lax harmony that reigned among them.

Mrs. Steele was dressed to go out, and drawing on her gloves in the hall, when her husband joined her. They had no intention of going to church together ; nor would anyone that knew them have suspected them of it. To do them justice it must be said that a reluctance to be *seen praying* by their near relations is a form of British shyness not altogether confined to the family in question.

"I wanted to see you !" Mrs. Steele said, looking unavoidably over her husband's head, since she was very much taller than he ; but not meaning any disrespect by it.

"Yes ? What for ?"

Mrs. Steele paused in her wrestle with a recalcitrant pair of new gloves and drew a note from her pocket. "I just received this from Miss Crisp."

"Must I read it?" He did not offer to take the missive in question. The 'Observer' was in his hand; and his spirits, like those of most of his countrymen, were lowered a peg by the news of the disaster to a troop train that that journal had just conveyed to him.

"Not if you had rather not," replied she mildly, "it is only to ask us to tea this afternoon—to talk over things! *I am afraid,*" with a slight threatening of a break in her voice, "that no talking is likely to do any good *in our sense!*"

Her husband looked at her with a somewhat aloof compassion. He did not feel the sting of the situation nearly so keenly as she did; and was conscious of having already acknowledged to himself, with slightly cynical philosophy, that his imagination was not strong enough to project itself into the state of mind of a young woman who—if he could rely upon the evidence adduced by his family—was not only willing, but indelicately eager to espouse his youngest son.

"If I were you, my dear," he said, not unkindly, but as if giving a piece of sound advice, which it undoubtedly was, "I would not accept the invitation if I were not sure that I should not water my congratulations with tears!"

His words had the effect of a styptic.

"I shall not cry," she replied a little shortly, tearing up the note, and then looking round rather helplessly for some receptacle to receive the bits.

"That is right!" he said approvingly if a little absently, for the major part of his mind was with the "Observer's" summary of the week's news, rather than with the domestic event which had so upset his spouse.

"You will come too?" she asked anxiously; and forgetting to resume the struggle with her second glove—though she was already late for church.

"Yes," he assented, "I will lend the interview all the pomp that my presence can impart to it!" There was a faint whiff of bitterness in his tone. Probably he was thinking of the days, when a certain amount of real pomp

attended his visits to native dignitaries or fellow officials in his Indian province. "He has such a nasty sneering way of saying things," was the verdict on him of some of his acquaintances, who did not know what an ache of regret those small sarcasms covered.

Mrs. Henley was one of the persons who was of the above opinion about her opposite neighbour; and was expressing it at almost the same moment, as she and her ally took their way down the hill in obedience to the invitation of the bells whose voices swelled up to them from the fine old parish church below.

"Well, we must show them some civility!" replied Judith in a distinctly ruffled voice, "must do some little thing for them!"

"I should think we must!" acquiesced the other, breaking into what was not one of her nicest laughs, "*considering the obligation we owe them!*"

Judith wisely affected not to hear this unpleasant pleasantry; and as an acquaintance, bound on the same errand as they, at this point overtook them, they were saved the indecorum of entering the church in a state of open strife. By the time they came out again, they were both restored to perfect good humour.

Tea-time had now come, and the guests and hosts were sitting round a temptingly covered tea-table under the same double cherry trees which had shed the virginal white of their petals on the heads of Jack Cameron and Susannah not so long ago. They had no petals to shed now; and though with a glorious past of snowy blossoms and a crimson future of autumn leaves, were for the moment but commonplace green trees. Yet their shade was grateful; and from beneath them at every season was the same friendly view of the small sunk garden and the bird's bath.

Just now the little thicket that called itself the wild garden was sunny with flowered broom and with the gracious opulence of the yellow lupins, which in these parts grew with weed-like abundance. Spring was all around—

that later spring which had dropped its sting and kept only its honey. Spring, too, was represented on the tea-table by a large glass bowl full of lilac blossoms the most "choicely good," as it is one of the briefest-lived of May's heavenly perfumes.

Around the board, however, sat only an autumnal quartette. Parthenope was tactfully absent, Susannah was firing off Christian young men's ginger-beer corks at Aldershot, the three Miss Steeles had, one in apathy, one in disapproval, and one in disgust refused their countenance to the family conclave; and no one had attempted to persuade the intending or—it would be more accurate to say—intended bridegroom to take part in it.

Tea was drawing towards a close; its scones and potato cakes done less justice to than Mrs. Henley's really hospitable soul and Judith's housewifely pride thought satisfactory. Both consoled themselves with the reflection that the Steeles were always poor and pecking eaters; and that the whole tribe had probably left their livers in Bengal.

Mrs. Steele having with languid firmness refused an appetising dish of little rolls with inserted Devonshire cream; and Mr. Steele having waved away the offer of a second cup of tea with a resolution that bespoke a digestion that would stand no nonsense, Miss Crisp mentally decided that it was time to open the theme for which they had met.

"I am glad that you have come," she began, "it is always so much easier and more satisfactory to talk over than to write over any subject, that one wants to discuss. That is one advantage of living so near!"

She did not think it at all an advantage, but she was nervous; so said what was not true and raised her voice above its usual moderate pitch in saying it.

"I suppose that it is living so near which has produced the—present—state of things," was Mrs. Steele's answering comment.

No most ardent well-wisher of the engagement under

discussion, could have detected the minutest grain of elation in that utterance.

The speaker's husband gave a dry laugh : " Proximity is answerable for nine-tenths of the marriages that take place on the face of the civilised globe ! " he said.

In point of fact he was in terror of his wife's self-control giving way ; and his speech was an endeavour to keep the conversation on a safe common-sense plane. But such is the unfairness of human verdicts, that Mrs. Henley, observed to herself that it was " just his nasty sneering way ! "

" At all events," replied Miss Crisp, feeling her task of making the entrance of her niece into the family whose gloomy heads now confronted her, appear in the most promising light, " at all events they will have nothing to find out about each other. They have had plenty of opportunities of discovering each other's weak as well as strong points ! " She laughed nervously, as she felt the feebleness of the bid she was making for parental approval.

" I am sure I hope that they will be happy ! " sighed Mrs. Steele in a tone which expressed how extremely unlikely it was that her wish should be fulfilled.

Once again Mr. Steele came to the rescue. " Of course we all wish them joy ! We all—congratulate them ! "

He spoke—still under the influence of that fear of his wife's fortitude giving way—with a forced cheerfulness ; which once again Mrs. Henley falsely attributed to sarcasm. He had also run a tilt against one of her pet hobbies ; so her voice was as dry as his own, when she replied carpingly :

" Congratulate ! Isn't that rather previous ? I always think that it would be more sensible to congratulate people twenty years later, when they have had a good experience of the *galling* of the collar, than before they have begun to feel its rub at all ! "

CHAPTER XXXI

A SILENCE followed this not very stimulating pronouncement. It might have been felt to be awkward, if a thrush who had a better opinion of God-Hymen than Mrs. Henley, had not filled up the interval with a stave out of his own Epithalamium. Before it was quite finished, Mr. Steele's accents broke into it :

" You agree with Burne-Jones' epigram : ' Marriage is a Lottery, and therefore it ought to be illegal ! ' "

The conclusion was a logical one to draw from the lady's utterance ; but she disliked Mr. Steele too much to admit this ; and it was Judith who retorted, with an eager spurt of indignation.

" It is fortunate that the young couple who are so soon to embark on this thorny enterprise, are not here to be depressed by our croakings over it ! "

The rebuke passed unchallenged. Only one word in it appeared to have produced an impression. Mrs. Steele repeated in a faint voice " soon ? " adding in a tone slightly flavoured with dismay—" is it to be *soon* ? "

Miss Crisp flushed a little. There could be no doubt as to the tepidness of the welcome which was to be accorded to her young relation by the family that she was so determined to enter, and Mrs. Henley urged precipitately.

" There is surely nothing to wait for ! "

Her coadjutor hurled a dart of reproach at her, for thus giving away the show, and compromising the dignity of one of the contracting parties. But the projectile in question

" Fell to Earth, I know not where " ;

and the object at whom it was aimed was not even aware of it.

"It is a truism," she resumed warmly, "that there is nothing so wearing to everybody concerned as a long engagement, and in this case, there is no reason for it."

The bridegroom's mother's response was to drop her already pensive head lower on her breast. The gesture might have been taken at a pinch, and by a stranger as an agreement, but her husband knew better. Was the breakdown that he had all along feared, coming now?

"I suppose," he said, not at all discourteously; but in a matter-of-course voice, "that we shall have to give a little time to the milliners and lawyers. Settlements is a prosaic word, but I suppose that we shall have to pronounce it and that our men of business will have to meet!"

As he ended he looked in polite appeal towards Judith, and she answered with a somewhat embarrassed laugh.

"A lawyer is a functionary that I have never had any need for; and which I do not possess; but of course I could employ one to act for me if necessary!"

"Of course—of course!—no doubt you and my son will decide upon that and other matters. I must explain to you that he is quite independent of me financially."

"Oh, yes, we know that!" interrupted Mrs. Henley, with a brusque air as of one cutting off the unessential, and once again her coadjutor threw an upbraiding look at her.

Was not this a second giving away of the show? affording an opening as it did to the suspicion that interested motives might have had their part in the welcome so one-sidedly offered to the projected alliance?

She was confirmed in this apprehension by what seemed to her the sharpness with which Mr. Steele took up the admission.

"You knew it already?" then added in his usual slightly satirical key, "ah! these things have an unaccountable way of getting about."

Mrs. Henley reddened with vexation. Her interlocutor's sarcasms always threw her on her beam ends. She always felt, or supposed that, there was an intention to

be nasty in them ; yet there was nothing that you could take hold of ! On the present occasion the offender went on unretorted to and unpunished.

“ It is nothing very considerable ; but enough to make a decent provision for young people, whose ideas are not exorbitant.” He paused, and his wife took up the theme.

“ Willy has never had any expensive tastes.”

It might have been a post-mortem tribute to her son's thrift by the intense sadness of the tone in which it was conveyed. It shed a gloomy silence over the small company ; a gloom which not even the sight of a goldfinch and a blue tit bathing, one on each side of the terra-cotta basin, could dispel. Then Judith spoke brusquely :

“ And Parthenope has been brought up to know that she will in the future be penniless ! ”

No comment was made on this exhilarating statement, and the visitors shortly after took their leave.

The hostesses at once began to show the rasped state of their spirits by a series of recriminations.

“ What possessed you to tell that odious sneering man that Parthenope was penniless ? ” asked the matron.

“ I thought it best that they should know the worst at once ! ” rejoined the maid.

Her companion laughed provokingly : “ You remind me,” she said, “ of a man who years ago consulted me upon a very delicate subject : he was going to be married, and had an illegitimate child and epileptic fits, and asked my advice as to which fact he should first break to his betrothed ! ”

Judith laughed too against her will, but quickly mastering a mirth that was but another form of vexation riposted with a *quid pro quo*. “ And why did you give us away by letting them know that we were aware of Willy's little independence ? Of course they at once naturally ascribed to mercenary motives our encouragement of the affair ! ”

“ I never encouraged it ! ” cried Mrs. Henley in indignant disclaimer of having offered even a pinch of incense to the Deity whose worship she reprobated.

" I asked him once to Sunday supper ! but how many times have I asked scores of Susannah's admirers, and no one can ever say that I encouraged them ! "

In her voice was that ring of triumph as of the parent of a victoriously impregnable beauty that Judith always felt to be unkind. She could find nothing better to rejoin than :

" Well, I am certain that in this case you gave them both the impression that you did. Your manner quite lent a colour to it."

" Then all I can say is that they have lived opposite to me for two years to very little purpose ! " returned Mrs. Henley, carrying her head high, and walking away fast, so as to ensure having the last word.

CHAPTER XXXII

A BRUSH with her old friend never left much of a bruise on Miss Crisp's spirit. Sparring with a housemate of long standing may become as much of a habit as sitting, walking or eating with them; and though such a practice takes something of the bloom off the grapes of daily life, it does not materially affect the basis on which either a joint affection or a solid community of interests is built. Both belligerents not infrequently brought their wrongs to the bar of Susannah's judgment; and received either light rebukes for their pugnacity, or pointings out—half gay, half serious, of the merits of each to the other. Somehow the elder women always liked one another better for a while after laying their differences before the young one. To-day that young one was absent and therefore unavailable; and the small brawl following hard upon the douche administered by the parents Steele, had produced an effect which did not wear off so rapidly as was usually the case.

Perhaps if she sought Parthenope, and verified the happiness of the person for whom she had been suffering such unpleasant rubs, that effect might be soothed away. Besides, Parthenope would naturally be wanting to learn the upshot of the meeting with her future connections. The girl was not in the garden. There was something tactful in thus keeping clear of possible contact with the elders who were discussing her destiny, and tact had not been Miss Bethell's forte in the past.

Neither was it likely that she was at the Bungalow. A little glow of warmth tingled through Judith as she reflected that never again would she be obliged to feel the pang of mortification that had been wont to assail her,

when in answer to enquiries as to her niece's whereabouts, she had been informed by the servants that "Miss Parthenope had 'just stepped across.'" Surely in the future the stepping across would be all on Willy's side.

Parthenope was found at last, where she might from the first have been expected to be, in the schoolroom, and—as might also have been expected—she was not alone. As Miss Steele turned the handle of the door her ear caught the sound as of a man scrambling to his feet ; and the first object that saluted her sight on entering was young Steele standing in the middle of the room ; to which unincriminating spot a hasty leap had evidently just carried him.

He stood there with his hair rather upright, as if a hand—possibly not his own—had lately been toying with it—and with a scheme of colour of an unfamiliar brightness pervading his visage. A look beyond him revealed Parthenope seated on the floor ; but with the difficult erectness of an ivy stem, whose supporting elm or oak has recently been felled. Miss Bethell had obviously been leaning against something, and that that something was the knee of the rosied young man, who, as obviously had been occupying the arm-chair behind her was apparent to the meanest capacity.

With a smile of pleasure and reassurance—till that moment she had never felt quite sure that Willy was really going to play up—Miss Crisp sketched a hasty withdrawal. A voice—the sincerity of whose entreaty it was impossible not to recognise—arrested her flight. It was a male voice.

"Oh, *please* do not go away. *Please* come in !"

The intruder hesitated ; when yet another voice—the female one—seconded the request, though it must be confessed with less eagerness. "Oh, yes, come in, we don't mind *you* ! do we ?" she complied.

Parthenope looked up at her aunt, but without attempting to change her attitude. She had evidently no objection to any inferences being drawn from it, nor was at all dis-

turbed by the fact that her tresses too were not as neat as they had been. She looked up with an almost roguish expression. Parthenope had come into her inheritance ; an inheritance of moderate beauty ; new-born self-esteem and overpowering bliss ! Her aunt looked back at her with a mixed sensation of gratification and wonder ; a sensation which had, as a third ingredient in it, astonished speculation as to how Willy with his pronounced limp could have transported himself in such an eye-wink to the spot where he now stood, from the arm-chair that still kept the tell-tale impress of his form.

Willy was dreadfully ashamed of his limp, not from personal vanity, but because he lived under a haunting fear of its being supposed to have been acquired on one of those battle-fields, which he had been so unsuccessful in reaching. In point of fact it was due to a slight heedlessness on the part of Nature, as to accurately matching his legs at his birth. At the present moment he seemed quite incapable of adding anything to his first heart-felt invitation to the visitor to remain. His fiancée was less wordless.

"We have been having quite a nice talk," she said, still content to occupy her lowly lair, "though I have been preparing him," with a slight motion of the head towards the young man, "for possible disappointment ! I have been explaining to him that I am :

'A Creature not too bright and good
For Human Nature's daily food.'

At this intimate acknowledgment Steele gave a short embarrassed laugh, and Judith, feeling shy too—for it is a malady as catching as chicken-pox—answered awkwardly :

"I always wonder whether Wordsworth's 'Lucy' was much elated by such a very moderate compliment ?" then, turning to Willy, she said, in apparent apology for her presence, "your parents have been kind enough to have tea with us. I came to tell Parthenope about it."

An expression of relief—or she fancied so—came into the countenance of the person addressed.

“I hope,” he said, trying to shake off the chains of the *mauvaise honte* which still fettered him, “that they made themselves fairly agreeable?”

The response was not very glib. “It was scarcely a question of agreeability—they came to have a little talk about business!”

There was an apparent tinge of surprise in the way in which he repeated the word. Evidently it was an aspect of the affair that had not hitherto presented itself to him.

“Business?”

“Yes,” she replied in a constrained voice, “I am afraid that it is a tiresome necessity and your father referred me to you; not,” she added hurriedly—detecting a sort of dismay in his face, “that I meant or mean to inflict lawyers and settlements upon you to-day—on your first day! It wouldn’t be fair—would it?”

Did he suspect the valour that prompted this confident implication? At all events, since he was a gentleman he rose to the occasion. “Not quite!” he answered, with a pale smile.

Miss Bethell here lifted herself to her feet; and crossing the interval which parted her from the other two, passed her hand through her loved one’s arm and murmured penitently:

“I am afraid that we have not been thinking much about *business*, have we?”

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE sun shone as triumphantly on Whit-Monday as on the days that preceded it, and though it shone on a deeply anxious and heavily sorrowing land, yet among that land's inhabitants a good many thousands had spirits to embark on restricted and modified outings and make merry in a veiled, and half-hearted way.

There was no bank holiday gladness on the face of Lady Cameron, as, with her hand slipped through her husband's arm, she paced the walks of a commonplace garden. The villa was held on a very short tenure by its present occupants, since Sir Edward might be given a command on one or other of the war areas any day, and Lady Cameron having been arrested by the landlord in an ambitious project of reform which would have involved the removal of an orchid house and the possible demolition of a gardener's cottage, had lost all interest in the pleasure grounds, and given them up as a bad job. Yet though the garden was commonplace, it was also on this May evening like hundreds of like plots, all over the country, a sanctuary dedicated to melody and perfume, though the melody came only through the beaks of little sober feathered British songsters; and the perfume from sun-drunk syringa and lilac bushes.

Lady Cameron's plan had involved a rooting up or cutting down of most of them, with the view of replacing them by choicer growths; so she now passed disapprovingly among them, and Sir Edward's exclamation, "By Jove! don't they smell good!" was received by her in dignified silence. Long as late May days are, twilight was beginning to fall; but they liked being together; and for some while it crept on unnoticed in its rosied greyness.

"We ought to be going in!" remarked Sir Edward at last, taking out his watch, "it is past dressing time!"

He spoke rather apologetically, as he knew that punctuality was hated of his consort's soul; and though, like the good soldier that he was, he himself possessed that small but useful virtue in ample measure, he never hustled his wife into keeping to time, unless it was absolutely necessary.

"There is no one coming to dinner to-night I think," she replied in a tone that was not acquiescent, "no one to be kept waiting if we are a little late! and in another half-hour, the stars will be coming out."

She lifted her clear-cut pale profile skywards as she spoke and he, pressing her small hand to his side, broke into tender reminiscence.

"Do you remember how we used to star-gaze in our courting days? how I showed you Cassiopeia's Chair and your only comment was that it would be very uncomfortable to sit upon!"

The expression of the subject of this reminiscence softened. In repose and especially seen sideways her high and sharply outlined features were apt to look a little hard.

"It is nice out here!" she murmured almost coaxingly.

"It is always nice to be with you!" rejoined he with that tender courtesy in which his manner was never lacking, either to his own or any one else's wife; "at least it seems so to me, except," playfully, "when you are suffering from one of your little megrims!"

She took the light allusion to her own shortcomings in the matter of temper better than she would have done from anyone else.

"It would turn any woman into a virago to live with two such maddeningly amiable men as you and Jack!"

They both laughed a little at so whimsical a line of self-defence and then the General made another and a wily effort towards persuading his companion to turn housewards, approaching the problem of getting her indoors from what he hoped to be a persuasive angle!

"Talking of Jack, I suppose that we oughtn't to keep

him waiting much longer for his dinner. Light meals at short intervals was what the doctor prescribed, wasn't it ? ”

At this appeal Jack's mother started, and set off almost at a run, towards the garden door ; then slackened speed, shaking her head despondently.

“ He wouldn't care if he hadn't any dinner at all ! Jeanne and I are in despair about him ! ”

Jeanne was the excellent French *cordon bleu*, who, with her *batterie de cuisine* had followed the Cameron household, *peste-ing* yet heroic, from one more or less inconvenient hired house to another, during the major part of their married life.

“ He is worrying I fancy at his arm not getting on quicker ! ” returned her husband soothingly ; though something in his tone conveyed to her ear that he was aware that the proffered explanation did not cover half the ground.

“ It seems to me to race ! ” returned she gloomily. “ Do you notice that he insists now on using the fingers of his right hand, though I can see that it hurts him ; and though that ingenious knife and fork in one, which I bought him at Harrod's, works so perfectly ? ”

They had reached the door of the house ; but paused for a moment outside it.

“ You perverse woman ! ” Sir Edward spoke in very gentle rebuke, “ you would be the last person to be pleased if he weren't in haste to get back ! ”

His wife's head made a movement, which was not quite so strongly assenting as that of a general officer's ought to have been.

“ Of course he will be passed at the next Board ! I suppose that I ought not to say so ; but I suspect that doctors may be *squared* ; that they pass men who are very keen, whether they are fit or not, and send back those who would rather stay at home, even if they are tolerably sound ! ”

The speaker gave vent to this utterance with an air of defiant wilfulness which showed that she was aware of how

indefensible and outrageous it would sound in the ears to which it was addressed. Its effect was even more striking than she had expected. Her husband drew a little away from her.

"If," he answered, in a frosty voice, and putting an evident constraint upon himself, "you have the misfortune to entertain such ideas, I can only hope that you will make me the sole recipient of them!"

As he ended he turned to enter the house; but she could not suffer him to leave her so.

"Now you are angry with me!" she cried in a very distressed key, "and you have every right to be so, but don't! I am so unhappy, and, as you know of old, to be unhappy, and to be cross are synonymous with me!"

Through the twenty-five years of their joint fellowship, he had never succeeded in being displeased with her for long together, and as the just lit electric light in the hall illuminating the spot outside the door showed him the tears welling into her eyes, he relented and halted once again. Her relief was great and evident.

"Oh," she ejaculated, with a combination of eager appeal and sharp annoyance in her voice, "wouldn't you like to tell Susannah Henley a bit of your mind?"

He smiled slightly, still ruffled, but with his constitutionally easy temper rejoicing at having escaped from what might have been a really disagreeable passage, and in his rejoinder he allowed himself a slight revenge.

"If I did, I should have to tell her what a remarkably pretty woman I think her."

She gave his arm a very slight push, half indignant, half playful.

"Bah!" she said, "with you a pretty woman is like a Divine Right King, she can do no wrong!"

"That is true!" replied he, "you have hit it and that is why I always have to forgive you sooner or later!"

Then they really did go in. At the same instant the dinner gong sounded; and the sorely tried artiste in the kitchen cursed among the flesh pots.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"THE odd thing is that he does not seem very unhappy!" remarked Laura Steele, a few days later, "at least," she added in cautious qualification, "not more unhappy than he was before!"

The female part of the family was gathered round the afternoon tea, which Daisy was pouring out. The exertion of doing so was more than her elder sister could face; but she now unexpectedly contributed a suggestion in explanation of the phenomenon referred to. She raised herself on her elbow to do so.

"I suppose he feels that he has made his bed, and must lie upon it!"

The proverb appealed to her. It gave a comfortable feeling of recumbency. There was a silence, while the excellent Assam tea diffused its perfume through the room. The tea was very superior to the comestibles prevalent in the Bungalow, since Mrs. Steele was but a poor house-keeper and none of the family had energy enough to try and improve the commissariat by criticism. But the tea was beyond reproach; having been sent home as a present by one of the far-flung string of fighting, flying, planting sons whom Mr. Steele so far preferred to the sedentary Willy.

He would have liked to drink his boy's tea; but his liver said "No," and he seldom trusted himself within the temptation of its fragrance.

After an interval the youngest daughter threw out a hypothetical explanation of her brother's comparative resignation to his lot.

"I think that he really likes kissing her!"

"It is probably a perfectly new experience to

him!" rejoined Daisy, with a slightly contemptuous accent.

Mrs. Steele cast her large-lidded eyes down upon the heavily chased Kashmir silver tea-tray. "Isn't that rather a bold thing to say about any young man?" she asked.

Possibly out of her past merged some fact or incident which motived the objection.

"Of course he has been at Oxford!" granted her second daughter, and then they were again silent; ruminating upon the possible facilities for iniquity afforded by the University.

Laura was the first to break ground again. "I am sure," she said, with unwonted emphasis, "that Parthenope is very amorous!"

Any Victorian mother, and even some twentieth-century ones might have rebuked a young daughter for a pronouncement at once so uncharitable and so indelicate; but Mrs. Steele never chid her offspring, nor did any assertion or explanation about the action of the passions ever shock her.

"Perhaps that is why they are so anxious to get her safely married!" she observed, with unresentful sadness.

"They certainly are that," returned the girl, with something of the irritation which her mother's speech had lacked; "when I met Mrs. Henley in the town this morning she stopped me on purpose to harangue me upon the undesirability of long engagements! Miss Crisp tried to silence her—and I tried to escape; but she went on holding forth in the middle of the pavement all the same."

"I don't know how they found out about his little independence!" Mrs. Steele said, with a slightly increased alertness of tone, "but they had, Mrs. Henley blurted it out."

"I don't think that they are very grasping generally," threw in Daisy impartially, "they entertain all kinds of unprofitable people, and Susannah would not look at that young multi-millionaire Jew, whose father was head of a Beef Trust in America."

They all languidly agreed, being not in the least ill-natured, and thinking it so little worth while to differ about anything.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the gloom touched with apathy of the Bungalow, in the heart of one denizen at least of Grays triumphant happiness reigned. Parthenope and Susannah were having tea *tête-à-tête* in the schoolroom. Since the event of the former's engagement, Miss Henley had handsomely vacated that apartment ; but in the temporary absence of the person who had superseded her, she had resumed, though not without a special invitation, her seat at the board. Willy had gone to London on the delicate errand of choosing an engagement ring. The idea of the propriety and even necessity of being provided with such a proof of her bondage had indeed proceeded from the bride-elect ; though she did not think it worth while to mention this fact.

And Willy had been so " dear " about it, so remorseful and even apologetic for not having thought of it, that the suggestion might really have been said to emanate from him. Indeed it was not till he was half-way up to London that the wonder just flashed across young Steele's mind as to whether it would not have been perhaps better taste on Parthenope's part if she had waited for the initiative to be taken by him ? But he had chased away the notion at once as unchivalrous and even ungentlemanlike.

It was really very pretty to see how the desire to have some overt sign of her tie to him had sprung up in her poor little heart, and leapt, almost without her knowing it, to her lips. One could not expect a woman as passionately in love as his Parthe to be tied by the rotten strings of convention.

His solitary *bonne* fortune had made him already feel qualified to generalise upon *The Sex* ; and by the time that he had reached the jeweller's door—he had had to consult Laura as to the right source to which to appeal—he had for the moment almost forgotten that he was one of those whom Mother England had had no use for ! That he

limped, was astigmatic, and had not a tooth that he could call his own in his head !

Meanwhile his fiancée held forth enjoyably upon her "situation" to the very respectably sympathising Susannah.

"It seems so odd to be without him !" she said sentimentally, "but," with a cheerful glance clockwards, "he will be back in an hour and a half now ! I told him how lost I should be without him, when he was measuring my finger for the ring—he could not get over its being so tiny !" she ended, with a glance of pensive affection at her little claw.

Miss Henley smothered a smile. "Yes," she said in good-natured acquiescence, "no wonder ! do you remember when you all but got both your hands into *one* of my gloves ?"

But Parthenope, floating on the rosy stream of her own reflections, seemed not to hear the flattering reminiscence.

"I wonder what stones he will choose ?" she pursued, smiling happily, "I left it entirely to him ! I made only one stipulation. I said 'no opals,' but otherwise I left it entirely to him. Oh, Sue !" in a burst of irrepressible enthusiasm, "if you knew what bliss it is to give up oneself—one's individuality utterly to another person ! to be merged in the Being of the one you love and who loves you exclusively !"

CHAPTER XXXV

SUSANNAH was not a shy girl, being too entirely free from self-consciousness to be ever much occupied by herself, which is the tap-root of all shyness, but for some reason, her companion's outburst made her feel uncomfortable. She was ashamed of herself, and rather disagreeably amused at the same time, to find herself unable to hit upon any more racy response than : " It must be very nice ! "

The measure of how far short she had fallen of what was expected of her was given by the pitying scorn in Parthenope's voice as she repeated Miss Henley's lamentably inadequate monosyllable.

" Nice ! oh, Sue ! How little you understand ! Oh ! if I could convey to you what it feels like to be absolutely merged in another person's Being, to have no wish or will or even existence apart from his ! "

She clasped her small lean hands as she spoke, and there were rapt tears in the transfigured eyes, that rested with yearning compassion on Susannah's somewhat shamefaced countenance. Susannah always disliked discussing the violent emotions, which she supposed she ought to have experienced ere now, and never had done. She should never forgive herself if she laughed, which it was still on the cards that she might do.

Into these composite feelings there stole yet another, the memory of Jack Cameron, as she had last seen him smothered in feather-bed fluff ; and pleading for his life. It would be impossible for two human beings to resemble each other less than Jack and Parthenope ; yet there was a kinship between them when they told their love.

Miss Henley had by this time finished her tea, and whether for this reason or because she found the almost

fanatic fire in her companion's eyes hard to bear, she rose and walked towards the French window that opened with difficulty into the garden, for the press of its budded climbers. It was wide open to-day. As she passed Parthenope on her way to it, she laid one of the capable hands that Miss Bethell thought so deplorably large on the latter's shoulder and said in a tone that, if touched with impatience, was feeling too :

"It is a sight for sore eyes to see anyone as happy as you are, my dear ; but don't worry about me ! I like to *be on my own* ! I should dislike extremely to be *merged* in anyone

"What even in Jack Cameron ?" cried Parthenope, with that misguided sort of raillery which was her only form of humour ; and detaining much against its will, between both hers, the hand whose caress had meant to be such a flying one.

There was a sound of unmistakable annoyance in Susannah's answer :

"*Jack Cameron ! Absurd !*" She tried to withdraw her fingers as she spoke, but the other girl held on to the unusual prize.

"Don't be angry with me !" she cried apologetic yet pertinacious, "it is because I am so madly happy myself, that I want to see everybody else happy too ! I am sure," going off into a flat yet impassioned generality, "that happiness makes one better—more sensitive to the sufferings of others ! I assure you that I felt quite a pang this morning when I heard your mother shutting up poor Jackson so cruelly when he told her that he had been kept awake all night by his lumbago !"

Susannah smiled, thankful for the diversion from herself of the flow of Parthenope's expansive humanitarianism. "It was not the best moment to claim her sympathy," she said, with a touch of dryness, "when she had just found that he had mixed up the labels of all her dahlias ; and thrown away her best prize semi-doubles which she had ordered with such pride at Vincent Square !"

"I suppose it *was* trying to a garden-maniac!" returned the other with an unconvinced air, "but he was so unaffectedly sorry; and when she told him how heartily she wished that he had thrown *himself* on the rubbish heap instead, he agreed so humbly that I wonder she was not disarmed!"

"I do not know about being disarmed, but I know that she went pounding down into the town though she must have been very tired after gardening, all morning, to get Pond's Extract for him."

"I am glad to hear it!" replied Parthenope, in rather condescending acknowledgment of these palliating circumstances, "but I *did* feel sorry for him! I do so long to see happy faces all round me!"

"Well, I hope that we are none of us very *unhappy*!" returned Susannah, with her joyous common sense, "we can oblige you in moderation."

"Do you think that dear Aunt Judith is happy?" enquired that lady's niece, with an accent of tender solicitude. "She makes others happy; but is she so herself? Do you suppose that in all her long life she has had one taste of the *Great Bliss*?"

"I really don't know!"

"I tried to approach the subject a day or two ago."

"Yes?"

"Oh! nothing very satisfactory!" with a slight regretful shrug, "you know how fond she is of quotations, she answered:

'I was never loved! The Palm of Grief, you will allow,
is mine!'

but she said it in a burlesque sort of way; and I don't think she meant it!"

"Good old Judith!" commented Susannah, walking off resolutely this time.

She came almost at once upon the parent whom she had been defending, and who, bearing a phial in her hand and with a hot, tired face that yet breathed out some sparks of

fire and slaughter, had just returned from her errand of mercy to the town.

"Where is that champion ass?" she enquired.

There could be no doubt as to whom the descriptive epithet was intended to apply, and Susannah answered that he had gone home, being so full of aches that he "wasn't no good for nothing"; and that he was sure "Miss" would excuse him!

"Excuse him!" repeated "Miss" with a withering emphasis; and proceeded to observe that she could have pardoned him anything if one of the victims burnt on the funeral pyre of the "*Midden*" had not been the new cream-coloured dahlia deepening to an apricot centre, and as big as a soup plate!

Then dismissing the subject with a laudable effort at fortitude, she rose again from the garden seat on which she had wearily sunk, and said:

"That gives me another half-mile's walk, as I suppose that he must have his Pond before night. I wish to God that it was a duck pond, and that he would drown himself in it!"

The joke, though of the feeblest, exhilarated its author, and she was further cheered when her daughter undertook the errand for her; though carefully abstaining from putting her offered aid on the ground of her mother's fatigue, as Mrs. Henley would never allow that she was tired, any more than that she could be or ever had been ill. Nothing annoyed her more than to have either possibility suggested to her. So Susannah diplomatically proposed that she should throw in the Pond's Extract as a subsidiary object to the conveying of a dozen fresh eggs to one of her customers—she supplied a score of half-pay "Colonel-esses" with the produce of her poultry yard, and set off on her solitary walk.

As a rule Miss Henley had no desire to be alone, being almost always able to find something to entertain or interest her in her fellow-creatures; and having a very hearty enjoyment of the "*Comédie Humaine*." But to-day

she was aware of an unaccountable discomfort in her soul. It dated from her view of Parthenope's transfigured face turned in pitying superiority upon her ! Complete contentment had hitherto been as much the characteristic of Susannah's mental attitude, as perfect health of her body. She did not want anything beyond what she had got ; and she did not suppose that she ever should. What then was this odd unaccountable disquiet of which she had been aware ever since her *tête-à-tête* with the bride-elect ? Is it possible that she was envious of Parthenope ? Poor Parthenope towards whom nobody had ever been able to feel anything but compassion ?

She laughed aloud at the idea and yet what an extraordinary look of rapture that had been which had momentarily metamorphosed the poor little face ! Rapture about ungainly Willy Steele ? Again she laughed. And yet what did the paltriness of the object matter if it could produce so sublime a result ? As she walked along the conviction thrust itself into her unwilling soul that Parthenope by some miraculous jugglery of Fate had got hold of something immeasurably more worth having than anything that she herself had ever or could ever expect to attain.

CHAPTER XXXVI

“WHAT has become of my chair ?” asked Miss Crisp on the afternoon of the next day, entering the drawing-room towards tea-time ; and finding in the place near the fireplace, where she had been wont to deposit her elderly form on a well-stuffed roomy arm-chair, merely a little lacquer table, on which it would be impossible to contemplate depositing oneself.

She looked round bewildered, then as a familiar voice broke on her ear emanating from some one coming along the passage, a light of rather irritated intelligence broke over her face. “Milady, of course !”

Lady Cameron came in smiling ; and without any appearance of guilt. “Don’t you think it an improvement,” she asked, holding out her hand. “I found it hidden away in a dark corner of the landing upstairs—such a waste !—for it is a really good bit of lacquer, and it makes more room doesn’t it ?”

“And what am I to sit upon ?” replied the other with a rather wry smile ; “I don’t think that that little gim-crack table is quite up to my weight.”

“Oh ! of course it was only an experiment !” returned Milady, with a very faint tinge of apology in her tone. “I found no one at home, so it just occurred to me to move things about a little ! and with Sarah’s help I pushed your chair into the schoolroom ! It really is much more of a man’s than a woman’s chair, and I thought it would be a blessing to the fiancé. He has got a lame leg, hasn’t he ? and of course they sit in the schoolroom !”

“What the mischief has happened to the room ?” put in a third voice at this juncture, the voice of Mrs. Henley, who arriving from a different direction here joined the

party. Her glance naturally realised at once the absence of the largest chair in the room, and also verified, without approbation, several minor upheavals of a decorative but uncomfortable character. "Oh, Milady, is that you? I begin to understand!"

There was a slight but unmistakable flavour of resentment mingled with the resignation of her tone; and the visitor became explanatory and smilingly apologetic.

"You see you were all out, and I had nothing to do, and I did think it a pity that you should not have all your lacquer together in one room; and that so good a specimen as that table should be banished to an upper landing; and as to the chair it has always struck me as too big and lumbering for a drawing-room, but if you don't like the effect, Sarah and I can easily put everything back *in statu quo*, in five minutes!"

Miss Crisp broke into a good-humoured laugh; in which after a doubtful moment her coadjutor joined.

"Oh, you need not trouble about that! I am glad that you found something to amuse you! It was very rude of us all to be out, but we did not know that you were coming!"

"I came to congratulate!" returned Lady Cameron; accepting as a matter of course the condonation of her offence and sitting down upon one of the few chairs which retained their original positions. "I suppose," looking a little inquisitively from one to the other of her companions, "that it is a matter for congratulation?"

"Undoubtedly!" answered Judith, with an emphasis and precipitation which gave the impression of a determination to get ahead of any inclination on the part of Mrs. Henley to crab the alliance.

The latter followed with her much more modified assent. "Yes, if marriage could ever be a subject for congratulation, I think it would be in this case. We are all extremely glad that Parthenope has taken to herself a mate; and Parthenope herself is gladder than anybody! She positively boxes one's ears with her happiness!"

Miss Crisp grew a little pink at this unhandsome exposure of her niece's undignified exultation over so extremely modest an achievement, but as no punitive poetical quotation occurred to her, as a retaliation, she laid up her vengeance for a fitter future occasion ; and the visitor not appearing to be aware of the insult conveyed, made the harmless comment accompanied by a very unaffected sigh :

"It is refreshing to hear of anyone being exuberantly happy nowadays ! It is not what many of us can be accused of ! If one can just be kept going, it is all that one can expect ! "

She paused a moment, while another little sigh heaved her handsome breast, and then added the question :

"And the young man—what is his Christian name—Willy ?—I rather like Willy ! is he in an equal state of rapture ? "

Miss Crisp's answer again came with precipitation in her determination to have this time at all events the first word.

"He is not of a demonstrative nature ! and his spirits have been much shaken by his inability to get into the army—you know what it must be to be madly anxious to do your bit, and be prevented by physical disability—but otherwise," with a determined nod, and a glance at Mrs. Henley, challenging contradiction, "he is all right—quite all right ! "

Milady ruminated for a minute over this satisfactory intelligence upon the truth of which Mrs. Henley had the grace not to throw any doubts, and said at last while a slight furrow, as if made by the passage of some disagreeable thought drew itself across her forehead :

"Poor little girl ! you know I made friends with her the other day when you were all out as you were to-day—by the by what *gadders* you are !—and I must say I felt very sorry for her. She seemed to be so painfully conscious of being chronically eclipsed ! "

Mrs. Henley did not blush as easily as her senior partner ; but it was now her turn to grow red.

"If Parthenope was eclipsed," she said, with a hint of pugnacity in her voice, "it was by the force of circumstances ; and not by the intention or will of anyone ! "

"Of course, of course," returned the visitor, yet without much pretence of conviction in her tone, "but feeling such painful diffidence as she did about her own attractions one can understand that it must have been a delightful surprise to find that she had snatched *one* brand from the burning ! "

The speaker tried to modify the offensiveness of this last implication by a laugh, but it was not very successful. Mrs. Henley had a baffling way of meeting an oblique attack by an onslaught as direct as that of a bull in a china shop ; and she now replied with great distinctness :

"If you are, as I suppose, alluding to Susannah, I can only assure you that she would never have looked at the same side of the room as Willy Steele ! "

Milady gave a slight start. Spoilt throughout her forty odd years of life, she was unused to being tackled so roughly and for a moment or two she was silenced. Then, the bitterness of her soul rushing up to her lips, she said sighingly :

"Willy Steele is not singular in that respect. I should doubt her ever looking the same side of the room, as you express it, at any man ! "

"I sincerely hope that she will not ! " replied Susannah's mother with great stoutness, "she does extremely well as she is ! "

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE atmosphere was so obviously becoming somewhat heated, that Miss Crisp's judicious proposal to change the scene to the garden was acquiesced in *nem con.* Spring had rolled its highest tide over the couple of acres that girt the pleasant villa. The yellow lupins, which some ingrates classed as weeds for their boundless liberality of bloom, were usurping a temporary supremacy over all else, pretty prunus and crab blossoms varied the sweet monotony of lilac and syringa in the large beds of flowering shrubs ; and the climbing roses held out so vast a promise of imminent blossom as seemed almost impossible of fulfilment. The blessed balm of late May's breath was felt at once by the three women, and by the time they reached the circular bench opposite the tennis ground, which had been set there to accommodate tired players, there was scarcely a crease left in their tempers.

There were no players now ; no net was hung, nor even any court marked out. Those whose cheerful calls had in former seasons echoed across the lawn, were now playing a sterner game on different fields. Yet to-day the bench was occupied by three young figures—those of the lovers and of Susannah.

"What on earth were you doing in that galley ?" Miss Crisp asked the girl later on after the departure of the visitor ; and Susannah answered with an amused sparkle in her bright eyes, and a mock air of apology :

"Oh, it was all *en règle*, I was invited—pressed, Willy pressed me to join them. No, don't be alarmed, he is all right ; but you see they had been in unbroken *tête-à-tête* since dawn and the sun rises at half-past three now, doesn't it ? isn't it an awful idea ?—so I suppose they thought a little change of atmosphere desirable !"

"They?" repeated Judith anxiously, "did Parthenope think so?"

But Susannah only laughed, and answered that if Parthe didn't, she ought to.

The advancing party caught sight of the seated group before the latter were aware of them, and could notice the disposition of the component parts. The man was between the two girls, and with face turned towards the one who did not belong to him, was talking with more animation than either Mrs. Henley or Miss Crisp had ever seen him, while Parthenope sunk in a love trance was nestling close up to his other side, and clasping in both hers the hand which he seemed to have almost unconsciously abandoned to her. The caress on her part was perfectly public and undisguised and she had not even adopted Miss Pecksniff's modest precaution of throwing a pocket handkerchief over her own and Mr. Augustus Moddle's wedded fingers.

At sight of the trio and their relative position Lady Cameron threw a slight triumphant glance at Judith, but the latter bore it without flinching, and the next moment Susannah had become aware of the intruders, had sprung to her light feet, and was hurrying to meet and greet the visitor. Susannah was smiling, a smile which showed her pretty teeth and recalled to the person at whom it was directed, not without some inward approbation of its ill-nature, the remark of one of Susannah's few detractors that it was a pity that Miss Henley would never allow one to take for granted the excellence of her *ratelier*.

Had Milady known it, a rather trepidating heart beat beneath those smile-wreathed lips. She had not met Jack's mother since the catastrophe of her refusal of him, and now felt a heart-sinking consciousness that Milady, who would certainly have forced her boy's confidence, if it had not been voluntarily given her, had been put in possession by him of the incredible fact. Miss Henley had for some time been aware of Lady Cameron's dwindling liking and had traced with real regret, though not quite without a streak

of rueful amusement, the struggle in that lady's mind between apprehension of having to embrace her as a daughter-in-law and burning indignation at her not jumping at the chance of occupying a situation so far in excess of anything warranted by her merits. On the present occasion no one but herself conjectured the quailing which underlay the pretty deference of her salutation.

Milady responded with chilly politeness, but made it somehow clear that Susannah was not her object, but that she was anxious to pass beyond her irrelevant presence to the betrothed pair; who were lagging a little behind, Mr. Steele having succeeded with really not much difficulty in disengaging himself from his bride-elect.

"I came to congratulate," said Milady, taking both hands of the latter in a friendly clasp, and speaking in her very pleasantest tone, a tone which was perhaps in rather too sharp contrast with that employed to another member of the party. "We made such good friends the other day, didn't we—that I was quite excited when I heard the news, and I am so glad to make Mr. Steele's acquaintance," releasing one of her delicate and delicately clad hands from its caressing hold of Miss Betholl's, and extending it to her suitor. "I can't think how it is that we have not met before."

Those who knew Willy Steele, might have detected a velleity of flight in his eye at this complimentary address, but he pulled himself together and answered that he was afraid he was not much to be met, as he was a bad hand at paying visits, and Milady, amiably rejoicing that she hoped he would mend of that fault, turned all her attention to Parthenope and said in a very kind tone: "Come, I must hear all about it. Let us go and sit in the summer-house. People tell me that it is a very fine day, but I think that the wind has a good deal of sting in it."

As she spoke, she slipped her hand through Parthenope's arm and led the flattered girl away to the retirement indicated. The rest of the party, thus resolutely forsaken, remained looking rather aimlessly after the retreating

couple of figures, and then sat down somewhat crestfallen on the circular seat, at least the three ladies did.

As to the lover, when the others had time to remember him they found that he had melted away.

"You are in disgrace," Mrs. Henley said, addressing her daughter with a note of sarcasm, which had not her for its object, "have you done anything fresh?"

Susannah's eyes were on the ground, and though generally ready enough of speech, and addicted to a pleasant kind of airy disrespect to her mother, she now seemed to have no rejoinder ready, and about her whole figure there was an unfamiliar air of being rather cast down.

Miss Crisp, seeing her thus nonplussed, came at once to her favourite's rescue. "It is useless to try to account for Milady's megrims, as Sir Edward calls them, and you must own that she was very nice to Parthe."

"I should say," replied Mrs. Henley drily; and using one of those homely sayings to which she was addicted, "that she rather over-egg-ed the pudding!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MEANWHILE the two occupants of the summer-house had ensconced themselves in its shelter, which on this glorious spring day was really not needed except by so inveterately chilly a person as Lady Cameron. As a rule she avoided the summer-house, though it was comfortable enough inside, and outside prettily overhung by jasmine and rose. But it was rather a sore subject with her, as she had never been able to persuade its owners to turn it right round, so as to face an exactly opposite point of the compass, and catch a squint of a view of the rolling fir wood beyond.

But Mrs. Henley and Miss Crisp were too well aware of the summer-house's value in an east wind, which its solid wooden back stoutly defied to be anything but perfectly obdurate on the point, and it continued to look full south with no view but that of the pleasant house itself, seen through a vista of long straight walk, and exuberant climbers. When they were settled:

"Now," said Milady in a voice of interested encouragement, "let us hear all about it, how it happened; for you did not seem to be expecting anything of the kind when we had our talk."

It did not need nearly so kind an opening to set Parthenope off, and the flood-gates of her confidence were at once opened with:

"Oh, no, indeed! That day I was down in the very depths! If anybody had told me that day what marvellous luck was in store for me, I should have thought that they were mocking me! I suppose I am rather thin-skinned, for I often used to think that people were mocking at me! Even now I can scarcely believe it! Sometimes I wake in

terror of its being only a heavenly dream. Oh, what have I done to deserve it ? Nothing, nothing ! ”

“ I hope that you don’t say that to Mr. Steele,” returned the other a little dryly.

Her punishment was already beginning in boredom at the insipid torrent she had called down upon herself, but she kept up her spirits by the thought of how plainly must be visible to Susannah on the circular bench the distinction drawn by herself between the two girls, and her nascent ennui was also tempered by a sort of compassionate wonder, at the glory that shone in the trumpery little face and the indubitable sincerity of rapture that rang through her flat heroics.

“ Oh, but I do ! ” cried the girl eagerly, “ I could not bear him to have any illusions about me—that there should be anything for him to find out about me after—after we are *married*.” She sank her voice a little as if the condition alluded to was almost too sacred to be mentioned ; then went on, “ I have told him all my faults, as far as I know them, *over and over again* ; and at last he grew quite impatient and put his hand before my mouth—so,” suiting the action to the word, “ and said ‘ Stop ! I don’t want to hear another word ! I am taking you as you are—so there’s an end of it ! ’ ”

Milady laughed a little. “ What sensible advice, and I hope you took it ? ”

But Parthenope scarcely heard. Her eyes were growing humid at the recollection of this—to the naked eye—not very lover-like way of stemming the flood of her confessions. Presently she spoke again: “ I am so glad to have the opportunity of talking to you to-day, apart from your extreme kindness to me. I want to correct the impression I gave you about Susannah, when I told you that she did not care for anyone ! ”

A very much livelier interest than the somewhat factitious one which had hitherto characterised it came into the elder woman’s voice as she asked hastily :

“ You have seen reason to change your opinion ? You

have discovered some 'one,' with a rather curling lip, "whom she *does* deign to be fond of?"

"Oh, no! not at all!" rejoined the other, hastily too, as if anxious not to leave her companion labouring under a gross misapprehension. "In point of fact I think her harder than ever, but I am more and more convinced that she can't help it."

The hearer drew in her breath a little sharply. "May I ask you why you have come to that conclusion?"

Parthenope fixed her inspired gaze on her companion's troubled countenance. "I will tell you. I was trying to describe to her my wonderful happiness—I am afraid" (in deprecating parenthesis), "that I may sometimes bore people with the subject, but yet I think they must be interested in it, and I told her how earnestly I wished the same sort of happiness for her, and that she might know what it was to have her existence swallowed up in some one else's, and she only answered quite shortly and drily that she should not like it at all! that she much preferred being 'on her own.'"

"*On her own!*" repeated Lady Cameron, with an emphasis that implied deepest disapprobation, "what an odious phrase that is! I can never get reconciled to it!"

There was something in the visitor's expression of angry and indignant distress that made Miss Bethell involuntarily avert and cast down her eyes as she proceeded, with a slight hesitation of manner.

"I mentioned a—name—the name of—of—a person whom I knew to be devotedly attached to her, but she only repeated it, and added 'absurd' with such a derisive little laugh, but you must not blame her for it. She has not got a heart to give to anybody—she was born without one, but she is very kind and obliging and we must not expect more from her."

Milady turned her head aside; and her eyes contemplated the green painted planks of the summer-house wall with eyes that did not see them.

At the same moment the unconscious Susannah was

undergoing a catechism on the circular seat from Miss Crisp, who even after having been laughingly reassured, by her young companion, still harboured some misgivings as to the unprecedented liveliness which had characterised the bridegroom-elect, when he had first been caught sight of.

"Milady will think you were trying to *entortiller* him!" she said, with a tinge of reproach.

The girl's sunny face clouded as it had done under Lady Cameron's ostentatious slight.

"Milady always thinks the worst of me!" she answered in some dejection, "but I don't think even she could believe *that*."

Both laughed faintly; but the senior's mind was apparently not yet quite at ease enough for her to drop the subject.

"I certainly exonerate you!" she cried warmly, while her elderly hand gave a small affectionate squeeze to Susannah's as they lay rather listlessly on her lap, "but," with a somewhat disturbed after-thought, "appearances were against you. What subject could you have found to spirit him up so? He looked as animated as you!"

"We were discussing the possibility of his getting something to do, something at home—since the army won't have him—some job in the Censor's office, or the Wounded and Missing—or in fact anything. He is mad to do his bit. Poor fellow, he is really very touching, and we were going over the names of people who might help him. I told him that *we* might possibly be of some use to him, as we know a good many men who are at that sort of work; and that we would do what we could. That was what brightened him up so miraculously—nothing very nefarious was it?" she ended, with a charming look of half-saucy, half-serious appeal.

Miss Crisp seemed somewhat relieved at this explanation, but she made no comment upon it; and her eyes presently reverting to the summer-house, she exclaimed:

"Here they come! Milady's appetite for love confi-

dences is easily satisfied ! Good Heavens ! how much upset she looks ” (as the other couple, having emerged from their bower, drew near). “ I hope that poor Parthe has not been repeating to her your mother’s suggestion that we should go and turn her house upside down and see how she liked it ? ”

Susannah had grown very grave as she caught sight of the pale resentment written on the nearing visitor’s countenance.

“ If Parthe has made no worse mischief than that,” she sighed, with a slight shiver of apprehension.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"I CANNOT attend to you now!" Willy Steele said a morning or two later, in deprecation of a raid made upon him, at an early hour by his youngest sister, "I particularly want this letter to go by the early post, and—if I am not over there," nodding, in the direction of Grays, "by ten o'clock Parthe will think that some catastrophe has overtaken me!"

Despite the deterrent nature of her brother's reception of her, Laura subsided on a chair, and with a slight curl of the nose, which at a pinch can express even more contempt than a lip, asked:

"Does she never get tired of billing and cooing?"

Willy's pen paused just long enough for him to say, with dry irritation, "You have an offensive way of putting things," then sped along his paper faster than before.

Miss Steele, thus warned off any further strictures upon the temperament of his betrothed, remained judiciously silent until the missive which was being indited in such hot haste was finished, read over, folded, enclosing a note in another and female hand and fastened up.

"There!" he said, with a sigh of relief, "that is done!" Then taking in with a mollified air his sister's crestfallen attitude, he continued in explanation: "Really, when you come to know her, Susannah is a very good sort! She advised me to write to——" (naming a prominent Government Official). "I did meet him once or twice at Oxford, and she, it seems, knows him rather well, and she has given me a letter of recommendation to enclose. Of course it is but too likely," with a sigh, "that nothing will come of it, but one would not lose a chance!"

There was a clarion note of hope in his voice and a

sparkle in his eye, which as at once occurred to his companion had never been summoned either by the God of Love, or the nearest simulacrum of that Deity with which the ardent Miss Bethell had brought him acquainted. "I must catch the early post," he said, looking round for his hat.

"You have forty-five minutes to do it in, and it takes ten!" cavilled his companion.

"And Parthe will be expecting me!" he repeated, regarding his sister with a sort of doubtful defiance, as if challenging her to find the excuse inadequate.

She took up the challenge at once.

"Does she *never* get tired of billing and cooing?" she asked, repeating her former offence with a wonder that sounded unaffected.

His sallow cheeks put on a reddish tint. "You had better ask her," he returned shortly.

"And do *you* never get tired of it?" pursued she, relentlessly pushing her point.

A hesitating moment intervened before his reply. "You choose to take it for granted that we do nothing but *bill and coo*, as you rather objectionably phrase it; but in point of fact, I want to talk over this 'Wounded and Missing' business with her," glancing at the letter in his hand; "and not only with her, but with Susannah too."

Laura gazed at him with affectionate compassion. "I would not do too much talking with Susannah if I were you!" she said, shaking her head.

To that he replied tersely with the monosyllable "Bosh!" and left her.

Later in the day Miss Crisp might have been seen issuing with a smile of satisfaction on her face from the dreaded business interview with her future nephew and his man of business. Mrs. Henley immediately pounced upon her:

"Well?"

"Nothing could have gone more smoothly," answered Judith, breaking into a laugh of relief; "he knew about as much of Finance as I do, and his one wish was to get the

interview over. In point of fact he can think and talk of nothing but this 'job' which he hopes to get ; and to which Sue is trying to help him. He knew already that Parthe hasn't and never will have a penny piece."

"Trust his odious father for that," interjected the matron, with her funny inveteracy of rancour against the unconscious Steele Senior.

"And he is perfectly indifferent about it !" continued Miss Crisp, taking no notice of the interruption, "he came out very well I must say—absolutely unworldly, and when the lawyer and I could get him pinned down to the subject of Parthenope and the younger children," laughing happily again, "nothing could have been handsomer than his intentions. He's settling everything he possesses upon her and her children—and a very comfortable provision it is too."

Mrs. Henley began to laugh also. "Parthenope and Willy Steele's offspring !" she cried, holding up her hands in mirthful wonder, "what strange phenomena they will be !" Then gathering from her companion's expression that this strain of reflection was not quite an acceptable one, and having no intention of being provocative, she added : "I hope that the lawyers will hurry up ! There can be no excuse for spending much time or parchment on so simple a Settlement. It is never wise to put an engaged man's patience to too severe a test ; and Parthe does work him rather hard !"

This was somewhat in the nature of a relapse into the strain which the speaker had resolved on avoiding ; and the always ready colour began to flow into Judith's pale old cheeks, but she was equal to the occasion, and at once answered in her spouting voice :

"The Labour we delight in physics pain !"

The quotation had not much aptness to the occasion, but it succeeded in its object, and before it was finished, the door had closed behind Mrs. Henley's vanished form.

drawing-room. "I kept down my veil, as a hint to her, but she would not take it."

Mrs. Steele did not acquiesce in her daughter's general condemnation of the practice alluded to; but cast down her large mournful eyes in a manner habitual to her when thinking of the past, and sighed too.

"It was a poor show," remarked Daisy disparagingly, "our Indian things were the only really good presents there."

"Except old Judith's dressing-bag," Laura said in conscientious correction of this statement, "she must have pinched herself to get that—it was really handsome, and Mrs. Henley came out with a cheque—for how much I wonder? Ten pounds? Twenty pounds? Fifty pounds?"

Nobody cared enough to pursue the speculation.

"If we ever had any luck," resumed Mrs. Steele in her quiet minor key, "Willy would have chosen Susannah!"

The Steeles seldom contradicted one another; and now the father of the family voiced his opinion as to the limitations of his son's power of choice only by an almost *sotto voce* repetition of the word *chosen*.

"How very civil and attentive she was to all of us to-day!" Daisy said, with almost emphatic encomium, "she quite singled us out."

"She remembered that I like two lumps of sugar in my tea!" sighed Mrs. Steele.

"And she never has attempted to kiss any of us!"

This last was Rosamund's tribute—a less languid one than usual from her place of repose.

"She must have a very sweet temper!" remarked Laura thoughtfully, "did you notice how well she bore it when Lady Cameron snubbed her so unaccountably for offering her a chair; saying she was afraid that she must be tired of standing, and Lady Cameron answered so shortly and disagreeably that she was very much obliged, but that she still possessed some slight use of her legs?"

"And poor Susannah tried to pretend that it was a joke and to laugh it off!" acquiesced the second Miss Steele in

confirmation of her sister, "but I could see that the tears were not very far from her eyes!"

"People used to think Lady Cameron very capricious when I met her at Simla!" Mrs. Steele said, with that additional cloud of melancholy which always enveloped her at any allusion by herself or others to our Eastern Empire, "they said they never knew where to have her; but I always rather liked her."

No one contravened this faint approbation of Milady, and the theme was let drop.

"I shall be quite jealous if you are always being closeted with Sue!" cried Parthenope, twining herself round her lover a few days earlier.

He stared at her blankly. "You must know that I only talk to her about business, the business that you tell me interests you as much as it does me!"

Parthenope's features formed themselves into a quasi-coquettish pout. "The Job. The wonderful job!" she cried, with somewhat misplaced raillery; "if you don't take care I shall be jealous of *The Job* too! No! no!" seeing a look of unmistakable annoyance cross his face, "it is only my joke! You know what absolute—*absolute* confidence I have in—you!"

She had drawn down his face to the level of hers and her eager breath was tickling his ear. Though it had occasionally crossed his mind that she was rather too lavish of them, her caresses were still agreeable to him.

"Of course, of course, dear!" he answered gently.

But his lady still kept him captive. Though she was small in stature, he too was of a height favourable to her escalading him with ease, "And you too have the same absolute confidence in me?" she asked, with an almost tearful solemnity, that yet had its relish. "You know that not for anything in Heaven above or earth beneath, would I play you false."

"Oh, yes, darling! Oh, yes!" replied the victim still affectionately, but now with a streak of impatience in his voice, "we settled all that long ago, didn't we?"

They went off together interlaced—a sight to which the household had become very used and to whose publicity Miss Bethell had no objection, he pondering somewhat anxiously as to whether the answer from the Official on whom his destiny rested would not already have arrived, if it had been a favourable one—a solicitude which Susannah had already been at patient pains to set at rest—she blissfully unconscious of the veracity of the homely proverb, as true of love as of anything else—that “Enough is as good as a feast!”

The wedding was to be a very quiet one—which meant two bridesmaids and the addition of only one supplementary parson to the vicar of the parish; the second clergyman being the author of the bride’s being; extracted for the purpose from his distant Dorsetshire parish, and unaccompanied by his wife—Miss Crisp’s junior by fifteen years—who was transacting her thirteenth Bethell baby in the brimming vicarage house, and sent a bouncing daughter to replace her and attend to the altar her practically unknown sister.

“You must not expect her to be like me,” Parthenope had said before the arrival of her kinsfolk, and as if fore-arming her aunt against probable disappointment, “as you know—I was always a sport in my family! and oh! what an unhappy one! until you—Angel of Mercy as you were—came to my rescue!”

This outburst could not but be followed by an embrace, but the recipient bore it bravely, saying to herself that since her niece’s engagement she had been almost wholly immune from these attacks and that after the 27th there would be an absolute cessation of them.

Mrs. Henley had discouraged the inviting of anybody, including the bride’s family, to the marriage. It was always absurd to treat a wedding as a festivity, in one’s total ignorance of what it might lead to; and the less fuss made about such a very dubious cause of merry-making the better.

But Judith was firm.

"I *cannot* let it be supposed that she is a foundling or born on the wrong side of the blanket!" she replied decisively, and Mrs. Henley, although protestingly, acquiesced.

CHAPTER XLI

"You have got your invitation, I suppose?" Lady Cameron said, addressing her son one morning at breakfast, about a week before the wedding; "at least here is mine."

"Yes."

"How seldom people manage to get so simple a thing as the wording of an invitation to a wedding right," pursued her Ladyship, with a cavilling eye at the sheet before her: "of course it ought to be your *presence* at the church and your *company* at the house afterwards, but here it is your Company at the Church and at the house afterwards. I wonder which of them composed it?"

Two of the three persons present had no doubt as to the authorship of the erring document being Susannah's, and to avert further strictures upon it, Sir Edward struck in with a reminiscence:

"Do you remember, my dear, when we were married—I forget who wrote the invitations on that occasion—my name was by some accident entirely omitted, and you were left marrying—*in the air*, as it were—to no particular object."

His wife gave a softened little laugh, happily diverted for a moment from her criticisms, but a line of annoyance continued to furrow her brow.

"I suppose I shall have to go; though I think that I am growing to hate weddings, almost as much as Mrs. Henley does. Shall you?" ended she, turning abruptly towards her son.

He did not answer for a moment, nor look up from his plate; but Sir Edward responded for him.

"I think that such old cronies will be rather hurt if he

does not," he said, and then, man-like, afraid of having thrown an apple of discord into his small family instead of the olive branch which was his favourite missile, he finished drinking his coffee, and left the room. Then Jack answered his mother.

"Of course I shall go, dear," he said, lifting the sad honesty of his blue eyes to hers.

"I wouldn't," she cried, with impetuous dissuasiveness, "it will—only give you pain."

"What does that matter?" he asked, almost scornfully; "who but a rotter would trouble his head about a little pain, more or less? and it isn't all pain; you must remember," a light of glad inspiration shone in his face, "that it must always be the highest honour and joy to me to be in the same room with her."

Lady Cameron looked back at him in a sort of desperation. "Oh, that I could tear the scales from your eyes?" she almost groaned.

"You would have to tear the eyes out too!" he answered, and she desisted.

High summer was not the season that one would have connected in idea with Parthenope Bethell; at least not until the period of her late efflorescence—early spring rather; chill and pinched—yet it was in high summer that she was wed.

The friendly villa that had sheltered her morbid humilities and her tiresome *épanchements* with patient kindness for ten years became one rose to give her a send off worthy of her new glory. To a casual eye Grays seemed to be nothing but roses. A closer observer might discover on that radiant June morning that there were a few other insignificant trifles within its modest demesne, such as servants, chickens, a bride and bridesmaids, a paternal clergyman, two mature ladies clad with a soberness due to the War, yet with an obviously festal intention, which was carried out by the expression of their happy, and—we must add—relieved faces. Neither of them had put actually into words, though Mrs. Henley had once or twice

gone near it, and would have gone nearer if she had not been restrained by her daughter, the apprehension that the bridegroom might not, as she would have colloquially phrased it, "come up to the scratch," that surfeited by sweets he might at the last moment, despite his limp, succeed in evading the yoke which Parthenope had laid with so unrelenting a tenacity on his—it was feared—at best passive neck.

But no. Thank God it was all right. "He cannot get out of it now!" Mrs. Henley said, with an accent of triumph as she sat restive yet in compelled acquiescence under her daughter's hands; while the latter corrected the oblique angle at which her parent's gala hat was set upon her head, and tried to restrain with combs the *chereur follets* which usually strayed in virgin liberty upon the nape of her neck.

"You *must* look decent to-day," Susannah was saying authoritatively, "to-morrow you may be as untidy as your ill-regulated mind may incline you to be; but to-day I am firm: you must do credit to me. Now do keep quiet, while I put the last touches, and then I must be off to Parthe. I shall not allow you to see her until she is quite finished, and then—you will open your eyes."

There was something of the prospective triumph of a creator in her tone; and her mother, who had by this time risen to her feet, and shaken herself as free from the instruments of decoration which her daughter had accumulated upon and around her as Samson did, from Delilah's "green withes," looked grudgingly at her offspring, with an expression which Susannah knew to denote indignation at the idea of Parthenope being, even on the day of her nuptials, the prime object of attention or interest in any gathering illuminated by the presence of her own paragon.

"Poor wretch," she said gruffly, "I daresay that you will turn her out quite tolerably; but even you 'cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,'" and brightening, "I don't see how he can get out of it."

"He hasn't the slightest wish to do so," replied Miss

Henley hastily, "to-day he is as much in the seventh Heaven as Parthenope."

Her parent's response to this daring information was a nondescript sound, eloquent of derisive incredulity, but it did not reach the ears of the flying girl, whose light feet were carrying her in hot haste to the room of the Bride-elect.

Parthenope was to be made beautiful. It could and should be done, but the achievement took time. Given the expression of luminous happiness lent by impassioned love nearing its full fruition, and no insuperable obstacles to overcome such as a grotesque nose or impossible mouth any woman with, or sometimes even without, youth may for a short time be transformed into something not far short of a Venus. The faults of Miss Bethell's features had always been those of omission rather than commission. At its worst hers was a face insignificant even to meanness. At its best—and to-day it was at its super-best, under the joint magic of love and Susannah, it was positively and distinctly pretty.

This was its owner's own opinion as she contemplated the reflection of her completed image in the glass, and said, with a deep sigh of satisfaction :

"I *do* look nice. Yes. You have arranged my veil beautifully; and that tiny wreath of green leaves gives just the touch of colour that is needed! but that is not what makes me beautiful. It is my happiness. Oh, Sue," sketching an embrace which was immediately checked by a prudent suggestion on the part of her companion, "yes, you are right, if I kissed you it might disarrange the folds of my veil—but oh! I *do* wish that I could put into your heart a little bit of what I feel. What a different creature it would make you."

The speech was of a type that was wont to move Susannah to a gay and impatient derision, but to-day—perhaps because on her wedding morning Parthenope had a licence not usually permitted to her—she took it gravely and meekly.

There was even a faint reflex of the passionate emotion written on the speaker's countenance to be detected in the calm loveliness of her own.

"I almost wish you could," she said, in a key that was not that of a mocker.

CHAPTER XLII

As the neighbourhood remarked to itself next day—for though it was such a quiet war wedding, most of the Half-Pays and their womenkind ended by turning up at it—“The whole affair went off very well.” When did a wedding not go off well, except in the cases of Juliet and Miss Peck-sniff? Of bridesmaids there were only two—Susannah and the bride’s sister who had been summoned out of the void to officiate in that capacity; the Steeles had declined to add to the number, but the ground on which they had based their refusal, i.e. their own Jonah-like quality, removed all cause of offence.

“We never have any luck!” Laura had explained. “The last time that I was bridesmaid, both bride and bridegroom died within the year!” And she remained firm; albeit Parthenope—rather to her indignation—assured her that it would be a disappointment to Willy, and that he really was very fond of her!

Miss Bethell had meant to be both kind and encouraging to her rustic relations, but in this too she was baulked.

“I am afraid that we shall not have much in common!” she had said in confidence to Susannah before their arrival, with a little air of candid regret, “of course I have outgrown them in every way; but they shall never find it out.” And they did not.

The father was a good rough man, who never would have suspected that he was being patronised by his own offspring, and who was furiously enjoying his rare holiday and telling Dorsetshire stories, in a dialect which he had acquired so perfectly that his speech was never wholly free from it, to anyone who would listen to him. With the sister it was even worse. Instead of the dowdy milkmaid

shy and rustic whom she had meant to draw out and bring forward, Parthenope was met by an emancipated young woman who patronised her !—a young woman who, having broken away from her family, collected house rents in a Westminster slum, and held advanced views upon Population and Hygiene. It was impossible to patronise a person who impressed on you the urgent necessity in the interests of the race of not wearing your clothes at all tight ; as it might endanger the proper development of future generations ! What in such circumstances could any one do gracefully but gasp and retire from the unequal contest ?

“ If she had grown up such a skinny little wretch as she was when she left us,” observed this young woman to her startled aunt, with quite a good-humoured dogmatism, “ she ought never to have married at all. She has not and never will have much of a physique—chest measurement far below what it ought to be, but I will say for you, that you have made more of her than I should ever have thought possible.”

“ It is very good of you to say so,” responded Miss Crisp, with a touch of dry irony.

“ Oh, pray don't mention it,” replied the girl, with a look of laughing impertinence that recognised no right to deference nor indeed to anything beyond toleration in her seniors, “ but when one remembers what she was——”

She broke off dramatically. Whatever Parthenope may have been in that past to which her surprising sister made such lurid reference, it could not be denied that on that ripe June day, standing before a lilled altar, and afterwards passing down the church on the arm of her safely landed prize, Miss Bethell made a pretty and radiant bride. Everybody remarked it to everybody else, and most people added a note of admiration after the statement ; a note of admiration which became two or even three as they verified the fact that the bridegroom was radiant too. There had been a vague impression that the part which had brought him before a couple of parsons and placed him beside a white clad young woman had

been a passive one. But lo ! he looked as insolently happy as she !

"I never saw anything quite so triumphant !" commented Lady Cameron, addressing the remark to Mrs. Henley, as they stood together for a few moments, after the return of the wedding party to Grays, while the inevitable photographer was grouping the figures before the rose-smothered hall door ; "it reminds me of what an old maid of mine said of a peculiarly eager bride whom she had seen, that she looked as if she had *got the World*. Parthenope—I beg her pardon—Mrs. Willy Steele—looks as if she had got the World."

"Yes. Isn't it astonishing ?" replied the other matron with intense emphasis, "I don't mean in this particular instance of which indeed I am very glad ; so far," correcting herself, "as one can be glad at seeing two fellow creatures make fools of themselves—but that any man and woman should look so elated because they have bought a pig in a poke, which is what entering on the marriage state really is, passes my comprehension."

Milady was too much used to philippics of the kind against the Institution in question from her friend not to let it pass unheeded ; and only said pursuing her own train of thought :

"And the odd thing is that he too looks elated."

This was not a very flattering ejaculation ; but after all Parthenope was not Mrs. Henley's niece, nor did that lady show any symptoms of resenting it.

"Yes," she answered, with a caustic smile, "but his exhilaration has not much connection with his marriage. We heard last night that he has got his job at the 'Wounded and Missing.' He has, as you know, been fretting himself to fiddlestrings at not having anything to do for his Country, and now he does not know whether he is on his head or his heels ! He wanted to cut his honeymoon altogether and present himself to-morrow ; but of course we could not hear of that. But it will be as much abridged as he can make it. Personally I think it is just

as well. They will have less chance of getting sick of each other."

Lady Cameron laughed. "In fact his patriotism a good deal outruns his love," she said, amused. "Let us hope that the bride won't discover it."

"It was Susannah who worked it for him," pursued the other, who of late had always felt a subconscious desire when in Milady's company to present her daughter in an advantageous light to the only person in whom she was aware of a scarcely latent hostility towards her; "I suppose that I must not mention names, but Susannah has a good deal of influence with a man who is rather an important personage in that branch of the Red Cross; and I must say that she has taken a good deal of trouble about it."

Her hearer's lip took an unamiable curve. "The God in the car, in fact," she said, and moved away.

And now the last stage in the proceedings had been reached; and the pair had gone off consigned to that *tête-à-tête*, the duration of which was the only subject on which the bridegroom had somewhat unchivalrously haggled. He had tried to reduce it to two days, but the bride's family had insisted on a minimum of four. However, they had departed equally radiant, nor did the majority of the company guess how different was the origin of their luminousness!

CHAPTER XLIII

THOUGH the bride and bridegroom were gone the wedding guests showed no haste to disperse ; and it was latish in the afternoon before the waiting cars at last wheeled off, and the people who lived within walking distance departed in couples and units.

The Steeles had but to cross the road ; and they had put off doing so till nearly as late as anybody else. Every member of the family had played up, according to their lugubrious lights. To her husband's relief Mrs. Steele had not shed a tear. Rosamund had borne her new In-law's parting embrace with stoic civility, and Laura had received without flinching the same In-law's eager and original assurance that she—Laura—had not lost a brother, but gained a sister. Mrs. Steele had had only one brief encounter of wits ; and that entirely provoked by herself with Mrs. Henley ; and Susannah had been so prettily attentive to them all, that as they re-entered their own demesne their sad tongues wagged in a fresh chorus of lamentation that her part in the day's ceremony had been a secondary and not a leading one.

Mr. Steele had not joined in his family's futile plaint partly because he felt a suppressed irritation at the taking for granted that his unattractive son could have achieved the capture alluded to ; and partly because he really wished to give a lift to the low spirits around him, which, though he was used to and even contributed to them, sometimes weighed him down.

"It is no use thinking of that now !" he said with philosophy, "we have got our Parthenope," with an involuntary accent of slight ridicule, "and we must make the best of her ! After all one must own in fairness that

she did not do us any great discredit to-day ; and your brother appeared to be highly pleased with her ! ”

“ Parthenope had very little to say to his looking pleased,” corrected Mr. Steele’s youngest daughter with some warmth ; “ he looked pleased because he has pulled off his job. Poor boy ! I am glad for him ! And I believe that the hours are nice and long, so that he will be able to get away from her for the best part of every day ! ”

“ That’s hardly one’s notion of an ideal marriage ! ” replied her father, but there was more of mild entertainment than of reproof in his tone.

And meanwhile the nuptial company had utterly melted away, and left Grays alone.

Not quite utterly either, for one solitary guest still remained.

“ Aren’t you coming back with me ? ” his mother had asked of Jack Cameron, as her chauffeur opened the door of her car. Her tone had to be low and its disappointment veiled, as several acquaintances were standing about the verandah porch.

He answered in the same tone : “ No, dear, I will find my own way home. I have been asked to stay to supper.”

A little angry tinge made her face pink. “ They can’t want you ! after all the fuss of to-day, they must wish to be left alone ! ”

“ They say not ! ” His tone was very gentle ; but perfectly determined ; and with a slight but disapproving head-shake she drove away.

Her son, eluding the little groups of still lingering acquaintances, made his way garden-wards ; and came upon Mrs. Henley, who was walking with hasty steps in the direction of the offices.

“ Are you looking for Susannah ? ” she asked, with her usual directness. (What was the use of pretending that anything young and male could ever be looking for anything else at Grays ?) “ She is watering some things for me. I am so hampered by this detestable garment ” (with a hostile glance at her festal attire), “ and as to Jackson of

course he forgot all about them ! He pretends that he has been helping in the house. *Helping* indeed ! I have just heard that he has broken six cups and saucers ; and *I am going to look for him.*"

There was a dread purpose in voice and eye as she made this announcement, and proceeded with no lagging steps to carry it out.

A very few minutes later, Captain Cameron and the object of his search were seated on the circular seat that faced the tennis ground. He had very gently dispossessed her of the watering-pot—a heavy and roomy one—and to ensure her not resuming her fatiguing employment, had emptied its contents on a fringe of magnificent Mrs. Simkin pinks, which did not need them. She permitted the liberty, without any protest, and acquiesced at once in his suggestion of cessation and rest.

"You look tired," he said, when his object was gained.

"According to you I am always on the brink of the grave," she answered. His perfectly needless solicitude about her splendid health had often bred mockery in her ; but to-day there was nothing but a sort of embarrassed gratitude in her voice. The memory of their last meeting, and of the cruel pain she had caused him during it, she who was always called so kind-hearted, lay heavy upon her. If she could help it, and if he had the sense not to reopen the tabooed subject, or even if he had not, she would not be hard upon him.

For the first time since his return wounded from the Front, he was in khaki. She knew that he was to go before the Medical Board again within the next ten days, and if that Board passed him—well she would not have many more opportunities for jeering at and setting him down.

They had had no speech of each other during the whole afternoon ; never had he been able to get near her ; so invariably had she been the nucleus of a monopolising group, or the cheerful victim of a bore or a crank. Her laugh had never been lacking at the right point of the Dorsetshire stories so freely supplied by the bride's father ;

and she had never failed in directing the stream of her fellow bridesmaid's remarkable theories upon subjects not generally treated in a mixed company into channels where it would cause least devastation.

It is true that his eye had fed full upon her, and the image of her in the simplest of faint green gowns with her great nosegay of roses, looking like the month of June, made up into human shape, added one more to the endless range of pictures with which the walls of his heart were hung ; so thickly hung that no smallest space was left for the portrait of any other living thing. Well, now at last he had her to himself, he had outstayed everybody—if only he could be sure that in that, and in his acceptance of old Judith's invitation to supper, he had not run counter to his lady's will.

The supreme peace of the peerless close of a peerless day lay around them. The Western sky robing itself in that tint of Celadon green which more than any other expresses perfect serenity ; the homing rooks, the voice of one early nightingale mixing with the thrushes' evening hymn ; the spice of pinks wedded to the breath of roses—such a wallow and fury of roses ! Roses like the dawn ; roses mellowly rich like apricots, delicately pink as little fragile sea-shells, coldly white like chastity, ablaze like love. Since Adam led the primæval mother to her nuptial bower, was there ever a better setting for an Idyll ?

CHAPTER XLIV

"I HAVE a favour to ask of you," the young man began and then broke off, divining or thinking he divined an impulse in his companion to draw a little away from him in alarm at this opening. "No! don't be frightened. It is only that I want you not to mock at me this one evening, as—as you did last time that we met! I am sure that I deserved it; but it—it cuts a good deal and I—I quite understand without it!"

The humility of the way in which this petition was preferred would have taken "the savageness out of a bear," and nothing could have been more sweetly serious than the answer given to it.

"I never in my life felt less like mocking!"

"Thank you!" he said; and then for a space both were silent. It is true that there was only one subject which was prohibited between them, and his lady was graciously ready to hear with patience whatever he might have to say upon any of the others, however little worth listening to he might be. But as to-night there existed but one theme for him in the whole scheme of Creation, and that if he spoke at all, he must break out into it, there was no course open to him but to shut the door of his lips.

Nor did she help him nor try, as was usually her way when with him, to lead the talk into some channel of friendly light triviality. Perhaps the long fagging day with its unbroken succession of little *corvées*, had told slightly even upon her fine physique and insensitive nerves, or as she used laughingly to put it "the place where her nerves ought to be," since she was never conscious of them by any sense of inconvenience or malaise due to them. Perhaps the proximity of the unsatisfied aching longing

beside her oppressed even her strong animal spirits. Be that as it may, she leant back in her corner of the seat as wordless as her lover, and he—since she had not forbidden *that*—took his full—no, that could never be—took deep and deeper draughts of the poison that had already permeated his whole system by long and not even stealthy gazings at her.

And she recognising that there would probably not be many more demands upon her clemency, acquiesced in his dumb worship. At last words passed his lips ; and he asked himself, as they did so, whether the uttering of them did not involve a contravention of the pact between him and his divinity ? Well he must risk it. The doubt, or was it the words themselves, put a quiver into his voice, as he said in a sort of dreamy reference to the noble and lofty promises that they had heard exchanged a few hours ago.

“ *Till Death us do part !* Those always seem to me such jolly words ! ”

“ *Jolly !* ” repeated Susannah, not, however, as if the application of the adjective struck her as ludicrous, in such a connection. It seemed to chase the slight languor, which her attitude of leaning back against the rustic seat implied. She sat up, and a painful animation dimmed the pupils of her eyes—the eyes that looked troubled and dissentient—into his.

Her gown was cut rather open at the neck, in the fashion of the day—a fashion more honoured in the breach than the observance by the lean and stringy ; but over which the perfect milky roundness of the girl’s young throat—not of the slender Anne Boleyn build—but strong and columnar—rose triumphant. It gave her companion such exquisite pleasure to drink it in, as the lowering light caressed its faint curves, that he scarcely heard the repetition—with indeed a difference—of his own word.

“ *Jolly !* ” she repeated once again, “ why those words make me shiver ! How could *anyone* with the least tincture of honesty dare to make such a promise ? How *could* they be sure that they would be able to keep it ? When one’s

likings and dislikings, one's body and soul, oneself change every day, how could one engage to love a person—to cleave to him, as those terrible sentences put it—for forty—fifty—years, if he—who meanwhile is changing as much as you, lasts so long. Till—Death—us—do—part ! ”

Her voice took on a tone of leaden apprehension, even dread, as she uttered the five last words slowly with a pause between each.

Then indeed the sense of her speech came home to him, drowning the joy in her beauty which at first had taken the sting out of them, and he looked away to where a tall thicket of Penzance Briars vied in crimson with the sunset, as he said :

“ It isn't always so very long nowadays ! ” He spoke quietly, not as if appealing to her pity for the innumerable early dead, but as one stating a fact as simple as uncontrovertible.

“ Yes ! ” she cried, with a sort of passion, “ that would be the one thing that would make it tolerable ! ”

He took that lying down, as he would have taken any bitter draught from her hand ; but her own conscience brought immediate ruth for her inhumanity.

“ I meant to have said nothing but what was kind and pleasant to you to-night ; and now you have made me say something quite abominable ! ”

Her distress was so evident and genuine that his one thought was to console her. “ You didn't mean it ! ” he said soothingly, “ I knew that you didn't mean it, but,” trying to assume a light and detached air, “ I should like to know—just as a mere matter of curiosity—whether—your—your answer would have been different—the other day if—if—you had been sure that I shouldn't come back when I do go—if you had been able to feel certain that you would be tied to me for only a few weeks, or even days ? ”

“ Are you going to promise to be killed, if I promise to marry you ? ” she asked, but this miserable relapse into the mockery she had promised to abjure broke down instantaneously into abject failure. “ Don't you under-

stand," she went on in a half-impatience that covered a very earnest desire to be believed, "that I *want* to love you—that I would if I could—that I would merge my being in yours as Parthenope advises me——" She broke off with a little rickety laugh, then hurried on as if afraid of his breaking into her avowals before they were complete : "In my own cool froggy way I am fond of you—fonder perhaps than of anyone else—not that *that* is saying much ! —but as some people have no ear for music, so I think that I have no ear for love ! Heaven doesn't open for me when you come into a room or shut when you leave it ; and until it does, I couldn't be so dishonest as to engage to love you *till Death us do part !* "

"I cannot think why they don't come in !" Mrs. Henley observed a little testily, "they must have heard the gong. I told Sarah to sound it outside ! "

"Everything is cold, so that it doesn't matter !" replied Judith calmly, helping herself to some prawns in aspic.

"The dew is falling, and Susannah has nothing but that flimsy rag of a bridesmaid's gown on ! "

Miss Crisp gave a slight shrug. "We must hope that their feelings will keep them warm ! "

"Susannah's certainly won't," retorted that young lady's mother, really snappishly this time ; her withers being wrung in their tenderest spot by this aspersion on the impregnability of the fortress of her daughter's heart.

CHAPTER XLV

"IT is the thin end of the wedge!" said Mrs. Henley two days later, as she watched Mrs. Steele's receding back disappearing through the gate. She spoke more in sorrow than in anger, shaking her head the while.

"It is only for two nights," replied Miss Crisp deprecatingly, "and she will be away most of the day in London." But her tone also was not one of exhilaration. Mrs. Steele's visit had been an early morning one; a form of crime of which—to do them justice—she and her family had scarcely ever before been guilty, an abstention for which they had often been extolled by their *vis-à-vis*.

On the present occasion the poor lady was so pre-occupied by her mission that she forgot to apologise for so unprecedented an infringement of her neighbour's privacy.

"I have heard from Parthenope," she began, and a fine ear might have caught a faint accent of distaste in the pronouncing of her new daughter-in-law's Christian name.

Mrs. Henley's eyebrows went up. "Already? Well, that is very attentive."

The speaker was never an adept at concealing her thoughts, and it was but a very little way below her words that the reflection now transparently showed itself, of how unnecessarily forthcoming towards a family who had manifested so little eagerness to welcome her was the bride's overture.

"She wants to come to us—for two nights—the day after to-morrow," continued Mrs. Steele in a very minor key; and looking irresolutely at a letter in her hand, as if unable to make up her mind whether to hand it for perusal to the two ladies, or merely impart its gist to them. In her uncertainty her large dark eyes wandered off into the

distance, as she uttered with mournful wonder, the reflection: "It is the shortest honeymoon I ever heard of!"

Miss Crisp's cheek mounted one of its frequent flushes and she sighed a little. It had been her hope that the waving of Penelope's banner was no longer incumbent on her. It had been a fatiguing duty through all these years, and she had been glad to lay it down. But here was a fresh occasion for it.

"As we all know," she answered, trying to turn her sigh into a smile, "poor Willy is madly eager to begin work, and I can answer for it that the last thing Parthenope would wish, would be to be a clog to him."

This claim of selflessness on behalf of her niece was received but chillily, though neither of her companions had the incivility to impugn it in words. Mrs. Steele again glanced uncertainly at the letter in her hand, and imparted verbally in her sad drawling voice a further portion of its contents.

"She says that she will never feel that she is really my daughter, until she—has stayed 'under our roof!'"

Mrs. Henley uttered the ejaculation which is usually written as "Humph," though no one out of a book ever really said *Humph*, and Judith gave a slight gasp. This burst of filial piety took even her by surprise.

"*But it is entirely out of the question,*" resumed Mrs. Steele, with far less drawl and far more emphasis than either of her hearers had ever heard her employ; "the kitchen range is entirely out of order, and it will take quite a week to have it set right! There are hardly any workmen left in the shops; and what there are, are so dilatory and independent!" A gleam of comfort seemed to illumine her face as she made this lucid exegesis of the impossibility of receiving her daughter-in-law. As no one commented on her statement, she added hesitatingly, "We might perhaps manage to take in Willy, but——"

"It would be rather hard to part them so soon, wouldn't it?" objected Judith. "One could hardly expect them to like that."

The flag-waving instinct was still present, but the banner floated rather feebly, and something in Mrs. Steele's silence seemed to imply, though it would have been impossible to say exactly how, that the privation alluded to would not be regarded by her son as a very heavy one ! All that she did, however, was to sigh again and sketch a little gesture which seemed to say that the problem was too hard a one for her to solve.

"Why cannot they go straight to London?" asked Mrs. Henley bluntly, "they will of course have to live there now!"

"They must look for rooms, and Parthenope," with another glance towards the letter still clasped folded in the gloveless hand, which showed the haste that had urged the speaker, "seems to think that they can work it better from here." She paused, and looked—now with almost open appeal—from one to the other of her listeners. Neither helped her, though they saw her straits, and perfectly knew what was coming. She was going to make an unjustifiable proposal; and she should at least have the annoyance of putting it into definite words. It was a minute or two before she brought herself to it, then: "I thought," she began, "it struck me—or to speak more accurately it struck my husband" ("detestable man!" interpolated Mrs. Henley, happily inaudibly), "that—if I told you my—our difficulty you might see your way to help us by—putting them up!—after all, it is only for two nights!"

This was an argument that, as all three were instantly aware, cut both ways, and there was no evidence that the proposal would be jumped at.

Yet with a persistence, of which minor-keyed people are sometimes capable, Mrs. Steele repeated it. "It is only for two days!" she sighed; and there was such an appealing pathos in her voice and in the mournful orbs which turned from one to the other of the doubtful faces of her opponents, that they, being fundamentally good-natured, gave in.

"It is the thin end of the wedge!" Mrs. Henley said,

repeating ten minutes later to her daughter a remark which she had already made to Judith, and which had driven that crestfallen lady from the field: "Mark my words they will always be palming her off upon us!"

Susannah was wheeling her bicycle, preparatory to her start for the hospital, but she paused by her parent to hear and chide that parent's plaint.

"I never mark your words! They are never worth marking!" she returned with her harmless impertinence, smiling the sting out of her words, though she did not look quite as radiant as usual.

"Why can't they go up to London to a hotel, until they find rooms to suit them?" enquired Mrs. Henley with waxing indignation. "I think I shall suggest it."

"Oh, no, you won't!" cried Susannah in alarmed prohibition, "you would hurt poor old Judith's feelings dreadfully!"

"She is quite as much disappointed as I am really!" retorted Miss Henley's parent shrewdly, "though she would be torn in pieces by wild horses before she would own it! We both," with a transition from wrath to pathos, "thought that we had got rid of her for good! and here she is back on our hands after only four days!"

"Well!" returned her daughter stoutly, "and if she is, how are we worse off than we have been any time these ten years? For my part I am very glad of it. It will be most entertaining to see Parthe playing the matron; and it will be a very wholesome discipline for you not to be the only married woman in the house!"

CHAPTER XLVI

So, four days after her nuptials Parthenope was restored to the home of her girlhood. Her return was shorn of its glory, and rendered somewhat flat by the fact that she was unaccompanied by her bridegroom, who had rushed up to London to embark on his "Wounded and Missing" work.

"What a mercy for them to have that terrible ordeal abridged," said Mrs. Henley, apropos of the dwindled honeymoon, "in that direction at least the world has progressed! In my youth, the unfortunate couples were compelled to disappear for a *whole* month! I wonder that they ever spoke to each other again after it was over."

Her companions, Judith and Susannah, looked at her, with covert curiosity. In this sweeping condemnation was there included a too vivid memory of her own wedding journey? Neither of them had the slightest idea.

"I scarcely think that that is the light in which Parthe will regard it!" replied Parthe's aunt, "and if not, it is rather hard upon her to have her Elysium so much shortened. One cannot be surprised if she is somewhat depressed."

But she was not. Not even the baldness of her premature and solitary return could dim the lustre of her married bliss.

"It was a cruel sacrifice of course; but neither of us grudged it! He said to me, 'Little one, I must do my bit,' and I—I am afraid that I cried a little, but I just put my arms round his neck, and said, 'Of course you must!'"

"That was very good of you!" replied Susannah, who, readmitted to the schoolroom, was the sole auditor of this exalted confidence.

"Yes," replied the other, "it was! but when one is married to a man, who has such high standards as Willy, one rises almost automatically to his level!"

Miss Henley gave a little nod of acquiescence. In point of fact her soul was full of wonder and questioning disquiet. It was clear that four whole days of undiluted Willy—limp, astigmatic eyes, false teeth and all—had been powerless to diminish in the least the glamour that clad him in his new wife's eyes. Was not such a hallucination infinitely more valuable than her own clear-sighted, cold grasp of realities? Why could not she idealise her Jack—a man whom many women would have thought needed no idealising—in the same way that Parthenope idealised her rather deplorable Willy.

Unconsciously her eyes fixed themselves with an intensity of which she was unaware on the countenance of her companion, in the effort to draw from it the secret of how so great a light could have managed to get into, and house itself in such a poor little lamp? She was brought to a knowledge of her own inward grappling with this problem by the surprised voice of Parthenope asking why she was looking so hard at her?

"I was admiring you!" replied Miss Henley with perfect veracity, "I never saw anyone to whom happiness was so becoming!"

The bride's eyes grew moist, and she clasped her thin hands in a rapture of recent reminiscence.

"Oh, we were happy!" she cried softly. "Why do I say *were*? We *are* happy! We *shall* be happy! Amavimus, Amamus, Amabimus! Ever since I learnt what it meant, I have thought that the most perfect of epitaphs!"

The other listened with a sort of puzzled respect, a sentiment that in all their ten years of propinquity, no utterance of Parthenope had ever before inspired in her. She felt like a person standing outside a temple; and listening to the voice of one who had miraculously effected an entrance into the Holy of Holies.

"It was such a dear little hamlet in a fold of the Sussex

Downs," continued Parthenope in a low tone, as if speaking of something sacred, "a very primitive inn, with a hop growing all over it. The first two days we did absolutely nothing but sit out on the hillside, from morning to evening, taking our luncheon and a tea-basket with us!" Her voice sank still lower, and she paused for a moment or two living over again those surpassing hours, then continued in a rather higher key, "The last two days, Willy took a couple of long walks over the downs. He said he knew that he should grow *livery* if he did not! and he would not hear of my going with him, for fear of tiring me!"

"That was very thoughtful!" Susannah commented approvingly, yet internally she asked herself whether such consideration was altogether a good sign. Walking could never be enjoyable to anyone as lame as Willy Steele, yet he had evidently preferred a laborious stretch across the downs to a prolongation of that unbroken *tête-à-tête* of forty-eight hours, which to his bride had seemed so paradisaical. But evidently no such reflection had blurred the cloudless azure of that bride's sky.

"In the same way," she flowed on, "he would not hear of my going up to London with him to-day, he said he could not bear to think of my toiling about by myself lodging-hunting; that I should do it so much more comfortably from here, with Aunt Judith to help me; of course I would far rather not have been separated from him, but I have made it the rule of my life, never to oppose anything that he suggests! Don't you think that I am right?"

"I am not sure," replied the other, smiling, "I think a little contradiction is rather wholesome for most men; but then you know," with a little air of mock deference, "that I am only an outsider!"

Parthenope regarded her with an eye of pitying superiority. "It is your own fault that you are! and oh! what a mistake you are making!"

Miss Henley turned her head aside with a rather restive gesture. "Perhaps!" she answered briefly. She need not have feared any further probing on the part of her com-

panion, who had returned with blissful egotism to her own idyll.

"We offered ourselves first to his people. Willy was rather against it; but there I was firm; I thought it was only fair, particularly as I am afraid that there is a little jealousy. It must be bitter for them all, and particularly for Laura to know that never, never again can they be first with him! However, they wired at once that it was out of the question, so I was able with a clear conscience to come here, where I had not much doubt of my welcome!"

She stretched out a confiding hand to grasp Miss Henley's as she ended, and the latter squeezed it the harder, because of a qualm of conscience. Her mother's phrase, "the thin end of the wedge," and the secret though not overt acquiescence in it given by herself, returned with guilty vividness to her memory.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE wedge did widen a little and the two days stretched to a week. But this was due to the accident of Parthenope catching a chill. She and her aunt had spent the day in London, on the quest of lodgings ; had returned, fagged and overheated, to enjoy, and in the bride's case misuse, the cool sweetness of the garden. She had insisted, in spite of her seniors' remonstrances, on sauntering about on the dewy grass till ten o'clock in white satin shoes and a well-bared neck which had not flesh enough upon it to keep its small collar bones warm, hanging on her husband's arm, and in consequence had awoke the next morning with a sore throat, a cough and a temperature.

"It is quite impossible that she can leave her room to-day, or probably to-morrow !" Miss Crisp announced after a visit to the sick-bed. She spoke in a tone in which annoyance, deprecation and a whiff of challenge were mixed.

Mrs. Henley's answer was a falsely lamb-like assent, for which she indemnified herself by the gloomy prognostic. "We are in for a month of her !" addressed to her daughter.

Willy behaved on the whole as well as possible, if it were not a *lèse amour* to pretend not to hear his partner's whispered suggestion that her illness was grave enough to justify his absenting himself from work. But on his return in the evening—he had dutifully and inconveniently arranged to come down every night—he was really quite all right, and only required a very little prompting from Susannah, in his alacrity to carry up sloppy drinks to the invalid, and even sit beside her, holding her hot little claw. It was a venial error if he loitered somewhat on the errands upon which she sent him to the drawing-room, especially

when, as on one occasion, he found the three occupants discussing a subject which still had an interest for him, though no longer its former keenness of sting.

Mrs. Henley had been narrating her afternoon's experiences, among which was an accidental meeting at Aldershot station, where she had found herself on her way home from a catering expedition to the Army and Navy Stores, with Sir Edward Cameron.

"So the doctors have passed Jack!" Miss Crisp ejaculated in a tone that scarcely expressed approbation of the fiat of the Medical Board, "well it passes my wits to understand what rule they go by. The men they pass are only a degree less incomprehensible than those they refuse!" Then becoming aware of the presence in the little circle of one who was notoriously in the latter of the two categories to which she had alluded, she asked with confused haste, "Well, how is Parthe feeling now?"

The young husband did not seem to hear the question, but replied with another. "You don't think Cameron fit to go?"

Judith shook her head. "No, I don't; he cannot raise his arm at all properly, and I'm afraid that he won't get much massage in the trenches!"

Nobody commented on this rather lugubrious supposition, but after a minute or two, Mrs. Henley pausing, with her half-dealt pack of patience cards suspended in mid-air, attacked a fresh branch of the subject.

"I think it would have been more friendly of Milady, if instead of leaving us to hear such a piece of news by accident, she had written us a line to tell us of it!"

Nobody defended the absent, who indeed in the present case was indefensible, and Mrs. Henley resuming her deal with a rather angry vigour, continued the theme. "Of course we all know that we have for some time past been in disgrace with her, though it would be difficult to say what we have done. We have always been as nice as we knew how to Jack, and though she has done her best to sicken us of him by her ridiculous pretensions for him, we

have been really and honestly fond of him ! ” She paused for a moment, then pursued with a meaning emphasis, “ If some of us have been unable to regard him with the idolatry which she expects from every human being that crosses his path, she can hardly pick a quarrel with us for that ! ”

This philippic was received in silence ; but after a minute, Susannah said in a sort of aside to Willy, who was standing by her work table, fiddling with her implements : “ Shall I go and sit with Parthe, while you are away ? ”

As she spoke she rose and, laying down the splint bandage which she was making, left the room.

The young man ran or rather limped quickly after her.

After the departure of both, Mrs. Henley continued to deal her cards defiantly, awaiting the reproach which she knew to be deserved, and which she felt to be hovering on the lips of her coadjutor. It was not long in crossing them.

“ You ought not to have said that before Willy ! Of course he understood—of course we all understood to what and whom you were alluding ! ”

“ Pah ! ” replied the matron, slapping her patience pack down on the green cloth of the card table, “ he is one of the family ! and I thought you wished him to be treated as such ! ”

“ And it is not fair upon Susannah ! ” proceeded Miss Crisp stoutly, “ it was quite evident that she did not like it. That was why she went away.”

“ Susannah’s admirers make my life a burden ! ” retorted Mrs. Henley, with a surface annoyance which thinly covered a deep and real pride ; “ if she were to marry all the men who expect it of her, my sons-in-law would reach from here to Aldershot ! ”

“ It would be better taste not to proclaim that fact from the house-tops ! ” rejoined the still ruffled Judith, and her companion whether inwardly admitting some justice in the rebuke, or merely because she was for the moment out of repartees, took up her cards again and let her adversary have the last word.

Presently, however, she remarked, in a tone of quite amiable appeal : " You must own that it would have been more neighbourly of Milady to send us a line ! "

" Yes," replied Judith, " it undoubtedly would, but I am afraid that she is almost off her head ! "

" I pity those two poor men almost more than I do her," rejoined Mrs. Henley with an accent of compassion from which a sense of injury was not yet quite absent, " they must be having a terrible time with her."

But in that she was mistaken. Milady had pulled herself together, and went about her daily avocations with a silent white courage and a pinched face. Since the Board had passed him, she knew that her tenure of her boy was drawing very near its close ; considering what a spoilt woman she had always been, accustomed to vent her little humours, without let or hindrance from either of them, on the two people nearest and dearest to her, there was something like heroism in her adherence to the resolution—she scarcely ever adhered to her resolutions—not to spoil Jack's last days with whimperings and lamentations. Her husband's former reception of her disgraceful indictment of the doctors' probity had not encouraged her to repeat it ; and almost without knowing it she leant on and was supported by his valiant cheerfulness.

And if Jack was not as cheerful as he tried to be, the two hearts that with different degrees of success hid from him the ache that nipped them, knew how little his sorrow had to say to any dread of the dull Hell of the trenches, or the Death Song of Shell or Shrapnel.

" You will be nice to her, won't you ? " he asked coaxingly one evening, after dinner, as he sat on the floor at his mother's feet, his legs stretching lengthily over the carpet and his head sometimes resting on her knees, sometimes, lifted so that he might push home his requests by the urgency of his eyes.

Just a few clock ticks intervened before the answer came—came fairly steadily and as if it were meant.

" Yes, I will be nice to her—as nice as I know how,"

CHAPTER XLVIII

HIS gratitude spoke in the lips which laid themselves on the slim hand that was passing over the brief bright hair which would have curled if it had had a chance, but had not—a hand which he arrested and captured for the purpose. But he had something more to ask, she something more to grant—something yet harder than his previous request, and that, from her point of view, had been hard enough.

“I know that your word is as good as your bond,” he went on, with an accent of tender truthfulness, “but will you go a step further? When I come back” (none of the Cameron trio ever overtly alluded to the possibility—alas, the more than possibility that he would *not* come back!) “can you promise me that I shall find you and her real pals? *She* would jump at the chance, I know, bless her! Shall I find you really fond of her?—not merely tolerating her for my sake, but really fond? Good God! that anyone should feel that to be difficult!”

He had dropped his mother's hand, his intense eyes stared into her sad and evasive ones, with a passion of remonstrant pleading. The little unmistakable pause which had preceded Milady's acceptance of her boy's first prayer, had been almost imperceptible in its brevity, compared with this second one. The suppliant had time to add another urgent plea.

“We have always been such chums, you and I. I don't think that in all our lives—I mean in all my life, we ever before disagreed about anything. Oh, before I go, do let us try our best to come to an agreement about this! It would make a *world* of difference to me!”

The boy's whole heart was in his voice, his eyes, and in

the pressure of the strong young fingers which had got possession of both her hands this time. She let him keep them ; she even returned the pressure of his, but her head turned distressfully from side to side and she remained mute. Then she gave a faint uneasy laugh.

“ You must remember,” she said, vainly trying to give the talk a light and jesting turn, “ that women are not like men. We don’t love one another for having gold hair and blue eyes ! ”

She had miserably known, without being able to control her tongue, that her answer would be most unsatisfactory to her son ; yet even she was surprised at the force of the protest it evoked.

“ And is that all the reason *I* have for loving her ? ” he asked, with an intonation of the most indignant reproach. He had grown deeply red, had sprung to his feet, as if by her speech she had forfeited all right to a continuance of his attitude of tender confidence, and began a fevered walk about the room. After a moment or two and with an evident effort to keep himself in hand, and express himself with moderation, he went on :

“ In a sense I suppose you are right. I suppose that it was her astonishing beauty that first attracted me ! Should I have had eyes or senses if it had not ? ” He paused a second in a rapturous recalling of his lady’s physical attributes, then continued rapidly, as if in haste to correct the unworthy error of his companion’s judgment, “ but that was long, long ago ! I have got far past that ! If she were to lose her beauty utterly, it would not make the slightest difference to me ! ”

His mother followed him with eyes of half-remorseful incredulity.

“ Not even if she was pitted with the small-pox or covered with eczema ? ”

At that he could not repress a shudder. “ Why do you make such hideous suppositions ? but if—as God forbid they should !—they came true, I repeat that it would not make the slightest difference to my love for her ! I have her

so securely *here*," giving his heart a smart knock with his clenched hand, "that no disfigurement that could affect her beautiful body would ever alter her for me! I shall always have her—*always*—as I have her now!"

His steps were tending doorwards. In his uplifted state, he was unconscious of the direction they were taking, but his mother thought that he was leaving her; leaving her while deep discord reigned between them and she cried out in a kind of agony.

"Oh, don't go! You misunderstand me. I can clear things up if you will only stay. I—I will do anything that you tell me. I *will* be fond of her! I *will* love her like a—like a—daughter!"

She finished with a gulp, but he either did not or would not notice the spasm of revolt with which she made her protestation. Milady had paid down the price, and now got her reward, for her son took her fondly in his arms.

"God bless you for saying so!" he murmured, while his lips gratefully brushed her white cheek.

For a moment she accepted his caress, feeling that she did indeed deserve it; but at the end of that brief truce, some, perhaps, misguided sense of honesty made her add the not altogether satisfactory rider: "At least neither she nor you shall ever find out if I don't!"

With that he had to be content. Even in the anguish of imminent parting, she could go no further!

At the end of her week of chill and cossetting, Mrs. Willy Steele was sufficiently recovered to betake herself to the London lodgings which had been engaged for her.

"I was so glad to be rid of her," as Mrs. Henley observed in a pungent confidence to her daughter, "that I begged her to come soon again!"

Both laughed at the logic of this affectionate farewell, but apparently there was something of its wonted spontaneity lacking in the younger woman's mirth; for her parent's eyes rested on her with a sharper scrutiny than usual.

"You look rather washed out—I suppose with that

continual running up and down stairs for her and her slops and arrowroots—nasty messy things ! ”

Susannah’s sole answer was partly to turn her face away, as if to avoid further comment on its condition ; and her mother pursued with a short laugh and a tinge of apology, “ But I must not get into poor Jack Cameron’s habit of thinking that you are always at the point of death ! ” then, as her daughter to her surprise did not join in her light sarcasm, she added, “ It was a pity that he should have come to bid us good-bye last night, just when we were away at that function at the hospital, and yet—I don’t know—good-byes are odious things ; and though I would not for worlds own it to Milady, I always feel rather guilty towards him for having given birth to you ! ”

She laughed again not quite easily, and as if her speech were not altogether jest, and it was perhaps as well that she marched off without waiting to see the effect of her humour upon her daughter.

The previous day—that of the party at the hospital—had been the last of Parthenope’s stay at Grays, and though she was convalescent enough to entertain a slight wish to exhibit her nuptial glory to the acquaintances who had only known her in her state of eclipse, yet, as it could not be in the company of her husband, who indeed had excused himself from coming down for this last night, she was easily persuaded not to risk the danger of a fresh chill which might delay her entry upon the blissful beginning of their joint life in London lodgings.

“ You spoil me ! ” she cried, impulsively seizing a hand of each of the seniors who stood beside her sofa pressingly urging her to be careful and carrying them in turn to her lips. “ I will tell Willy, and he will be so grateful to you for taking such care of his wife ! ”

CHAPTER XLIX

THE hospital, by the mouth of Susannah, had summoned the two elder ladies of Grays as well as herself, to lend their aid in promoting the success of the entertainment to its wounded and convalescent occupants. It was to be of a varied nature ending up with a concert at which some of the most musical and least incapacitated of the Tommies were to display their talents.

The trio departed early in the afternoon, and Parthenope was adjured by them all at parting not to expect them till she saw them, and by no means to sit up for them.

She promised with grateful docility, and was so mindful of their exhortations to her not to risk a relapse by lying out on her chaise-longue in the garden after the dew had begun to rise, that she summoned Sarah to transfer her and her cushions and wrappings to the drawing-room, while yet the sun's untired steeds were some way from their goal "beyond the Western foam," and Chaucer's "smalle fowles" had not begun to chant good night.

Sarah was inclined to be cross—but for Mrs. Willy Steele and her ailments, she would have had an evening to herself to prosecute that long-winded amour with a salesman at a dry goods store, which had agreeably occupied her leisure for the last decade. But Parthenope was so amiably apologetic for giving trouble, and so much more interested in the dry goods man than she had ever before shown herself, that the old servant retired mollified to the back regions; though without being quite convinced of the soundness of the bride's advice to crown her suitor's vows without delay.

To-night so overflowing was Mrs. Willy Steele's hymeneal cup, that she would fain have united everybody to every-

body else, without respect of age or suitability. She was glad that her housemates had all gone out. No conversation of theirs could equal the sweetness and brightness of her reflections ; and of her forecast of her future life. And for companion had she not the one note that she had ever received from her Willy ?

It is true that that billet could hardly come under the head of a love-letter, as it was merely a brief announcement of his inability to meet her at Waterloo Station on the morrow ; and a prosaic statement of his having ordered a roast chicken and asparagus for their first joint house-keeping dinner. Brief and prosaic it might seem to a lay eye ; but to the initiated in the mysteries of wedded life, of what conjugal intimacy and taking for grantedness of an identity of interest its short bald sentences spoke ! She kissed it. Never would she part from it ! it should be buried with her !

It was after her small convalescent supper, carefully ordered by a thoughtful aunt, and the hall clock had just deliberately informed her that it was nine o'clock, when she reached this romantic resolve, and a moment afterwards was startled by the sound of the front door bell, followed by the sudden intrusion upon her solitude of a figure in khaki which in its eagerness had evidently found Sarah's announcement too slow and passing her, announced itself. It was that of Jack Cameron.

His eyes fell upon her for only an instant, then travelled like lightning round the room in hungry search, then returned to her. "What has become of them all ?" he asked with a brusqueness which would have shocked his father, and mechanically taking the hand held out to him with complete unconsciousness of having done so.

"How you startled me !" she cried, with self-consciousness enough for two—sitting up, and rearranging the precautionary trifle of lace about her head, which proclaimed her late indisposition.

"I am sorry !" he apologised in absent reminiscence of hereditary civility, but with eyes still questing, as if could

he only look hard enough he must find the objects of his search.

"They are all out," she answered with an almost imperceptible accent of offended protest at being ignored; then with a swift recovery of the happy complacency which had been endangered for only an instant, she added playfully, "all but me! I am afraid that you will have to put up with only me!"

"Out?" he repeated in a tone of the frankest dismay, "but I came to bid them good-bye!"

His eyes sought her, as if in the endeavour to force her to recant a statement so much too bad to be true.

"Oh! you are off, are you?" replied she, with a sudden access of surface sympathy, "oh, I *am* sorry, but I suppose I ought not to say that! do sit down, you need not be afraid of keeping me up. I am allowed to stay downstairs till nine-thirty!"

He did not hear or pretend to hear a word of her banal speech. He only shot out another point-blank question at her. "Where have they gone?"

There was a small and perfectly unperceived stiffening in the tone of her reply. "To the hospital. There is a function there to-night. I should have thought that you would have heard of it."

He shook his head. "No! I have been in London all day."

"I wonder that Milady did not mention it to you?"

"I have not been home. I came straight here from the station!"

A silence ensued, he in a black pit of gloom, and she with the enveloping robe of her self-consciousness a little rent with pity.

"I suppose," he suggested by and by in a hollow voice, "that they will not be very late—that they will be back before long."

She shook her be-laced head. "They told me not to expect them till I saw them—and to be sure not to stay up for them! They were anxious that I should not over-

tire myself—you see that I have not been very well, and the doctor is firm about early hours."

He sat down on the nearest chair ; and tried to mutter something about being sorry ; but in a moment his overpowering preoccupation had recaptured him.

"I suppose," he said hesitatingly, "that I may—that there is no objection—that no one would be likely to object to my waiting here—half an hour—on the chance?"

Parthenope nodded encouragingly. "Of course not ! Half an hour is quite within my limits, and even if it were not, I should stretch a point for you to-night."

He thanked her absently, feeling foggily how infinitely preferable it would have been if she had left him alone ! how much less intolerable it would have been to wait and listen and wander about the room ; recognising and kissing little stray objects belonging to Susannah. But his companion was of the school who believe that a person in sore trouble should never be left to solitude or silence, but should be distracted, amused, wrested from their painful absorption by light chatter and mild pleasantries. So she began :

"We have not met since the *Eventful day* ! How lucky I was in my weather ! 'Happy is the bride that the sun shines on !' If that saying is true, as I said to my—husband" (a hint of coy shying at the unfamiliar word) "I have a good chance, haven't I ?"

Cameron with an effort made a sound of assent. In his heart he was cursing her glibness, which hindered, to some extent, his hearing sounds from the road. She on her part reflected :

"What a stupefying effect love has had upon him ! How unlike Willy !" But faithful to her creed, she started a new topic. "If, as I fear, you have to go before they return, I will give any messages that you like to leave with me ! I assure you that you may trust me ! I am a very dependable person !"

Thanks were difficult. The supposition involved in her offer—that he would have to go with his raging thirst

unslaked—made acknowledgments of her civility difficult, yet he did thank her.

“They will be so sorry to have missed you,” continued Parthenope, with a perfectly unfeigned accent of compassion, “at least—some of them will.” She ended on a note of condolence.

CHAPTER L

"Some of them?" This time at least the words had succeeded in riveting his attention. He repeated them, as if, simple as they were, he failed to grasp their meaning.

"Yes," she answered friendly, "I am sure I can answer for them that both Mrs. Henley and dear Aunt Judith will be truly sorry to be away to-night of all nights! And it is so seldom that they are out in the evening!"

Her small face was lifted towards his with an expression of slightly inquisitive compassion written on its bland little features. Certainly, it was best in his own interest that he should know the truth and after all it could not be much news to him.

"As to Susannah," she explained, with a shrug of her narrow shoulders, which conveyed the idea that, had it been in her power, she would have altered such a state of things. "You know what she is! she always hates saying good-bye to anyone!"

His eyes that had skimmed hitherto with such unconscious slighting over her, now plunged in hungry asking into hers. Did her speech imply that, with all her high coldness, his lady yet felt a pang at parting from him? His companion perceived the flame of trembling hope that her words had lit, and at once said to herself that it was her bounden duty to blow it out.

"You must not misunderstand me!" she said, answering his dumb question with a little air of pitying candour, "that would only lead to disappointment! She dislikes saying good-bye to people, not because she feels too much, but because she feels too little!"

Her extinguisher acted admirably. The flame went out at once. "Though I am far, far from agreeing with her

point of view," pursued Parthenope, with what she felt to be a pretty air of impartiality, "I do to a certain extent understand it! She is very kind-hearted and dislikes giving pain, and to quote her own words, it is so disagreeable to have to appear much sorrier than you really are!"

The hearer clutched his red-banded cap—he was a Staff Officer—convulsively, and it was a moment or two before he could frame the low-worded question: "Did she say that—lately?"

Parthenope hesitated. In point of fact it was nearly a year ago that Susannah had given utterance to the sentiment quoted; and it had been apropos of a parting with her multi-millionaire admirer of the Beef Trust, but possibly Mrs. Willy Steele had forgotten this circumstance. At all events she answered, after a brief delay:

"Lately? what do you call lately? I cannot remember the exact date, but I am afraid that there is no doubt that she is 'of the same opinion still.'" Her tone was carefully sympathetic; and she really felt sorry for him; almost quite believing that Susannah would be bored by his adieux; and that the cauterizing treatment she was employing was in reality the wholesomest to apply to his wound. If underneath her purer motives a point of malice lurked, a sense that he deserved a little punishment for his really boorish blindness to her new claims to consideration, she was unaware of it. Her pose was that of the wise elder sister which her wedded state rendered seemly, regretfully hurting in order to heal.

There was a pause. He would have given ten years of his life to disbelieve her, and the memory of his having called her on a former occasion "a spiteful little cat" flashed for half a second comfortingly across his storm-torn soul, but to-night she did not look or sound spiteful, sorry to pain him rather, and as if the admission had slipped out against her will. And alas! wasn't there much in his own experience of his lady, in his own memory of her snow-cold looks and words to confirm and render probable what he had just heard?

As he gave no sign of an intention to contest or even comment upon her statement, she flowed on—not looking at her companion any longer ; but peering dreamily in front of her.

“ It seems so strange now to realise that once I used to envy Susannah her incapacity for suffering ; but oh ! *how* one changes ! It seems incredible to me now that I should not always have felt ‘ in the deep heart’s core,’ how infinitely preferable *LOVE* with all its train of possible agonies is to that comfortable cold indifference I used to covet.”

Tears of genuine feeling gave her insignificant eyes depth and dignity, and caused them to brim over. They were indeed so misted that she failed to see that her companion was not listening to her. His heart was so wholly occupied by his own anguish that his companion’s high flying sentiments, though perfectly true and real, found no entrance at its grief-barred door. But he brought out at last a few words—a question.

“ Do you mean—do I understand you to mean—that she would rather that I went without—that it would bore her to say good-bye to me ? ”

Parthenope brought back her rapt look—a little shorn of its raptness—to his face.

“ *Bore her !* ” she repeated, with a slight accent of remonstrance, “ what a harsh word. Oh, no ! she is much too kind-hearted to be bored by the sight of suffering ! I don’t say that it would not distress her ! ”

He was standing now as if veering towards departure, yet he did not move. The battle that was swaying to and fro within him was one not easily decided ; that contest between the famine to look upon his idol, to hear her—to touch her once—*once* again for not improbably the last time in his life ; and the scarcely less urgent dread of irking her by the agony—which he realised his inability quite to hide—of his adieux. The words of his present companion would probably have weighed but lightly with him, if they had not found confirmation in his own memory !

How often had Susannah dilated to him—half playfully it is true, but only half—on her dislike of long faces and tearful farewells, on her own inability to grieve about anything or anybody ; and though in that last infinitely precious evening colloquy, she had told him with gracious regret that she would fain love him if she could, yet in her high clear honesty, she never hinted by word or tone, that the effort could at any future time be successful.

Why then should he ungenerously bring the pressure of his imminent departure upon her, in order to force from her some crumbs of kindness which could owe their birth only to compassion ? It would be acting more like a gentleman to go. After that he hesitated no longer.

Holding out his hand to Mrs. Willy Steele, he said in a steady voice : “ Will you say good-bye to them—all for me : and tell them that—that I came.”

His resolution took her aback. He had seemed so vacillating. She retained his fingers in hers for a moment, while she asked curiously, with a touch of slyness and a large pinch of pity.

“ Shall I say nothing special to—anyone for you ? ”

For two or three heart beats he was in doubt ; then, “ No,” he answered firmly, “ only my love and good-bye to them—all.”

He was out of the room before she could point out to him that in any case he might prolong his stay, as she herself was allowed to sit up till nine-thirty !

CHAPTER LI

THE June night was yet very young ; and Parthenope had only just rung for Sarah to help her to her premature couch—she was in no hurry to forgo the minor luxuries of invalidhood—when a discordant taxi-horn announced the return of the three “strayed revellers.”

They all came in talking in cheerful tones, as of those who had been instrumental in the successful pulling off of some undertaking in which they had been engaged.

“Not gone to bed yet ?” cried Susannah, entering first, in a voice of playful reproof, “why it is five minutes past your bedtime !”

As she spoke she was unwinding from about her hatless head a pale blue gauze motor veil which charmingly framed her soft bright face.

“What a night !” ejaculated Mrs. Henley, following and tugging violently at the soberer tinted envelope of her own head. “Goodness, child, you have tied me up in a hangman’s knot ! What a moon !”

“What a moon, indeed !” echoed Judith, entering the last but not the least enthusiastic. “It really is no figure of speech to say, ‘This night is but the daylight sick.’”

For once in their joint relations Miss Crisp was quoting poetry without any intention of avenging herself on her partner, and as happily the latter did not recognise the Shakespearean bouquet, no harm was done.

“It is a shame to shut it out !” cried the matron, walking to the windows, and vigorously drawing the curtains back. “Bless my soul how stuffy this room feels !”

Her right arm was extended to fling the casement wide, then a sudden and rather grudging impulse made her draw

it back as she added in somewhat protesting postscript :
" I suppose that night air is bad for an invalid. Though I have always believed that to be a fusty popular fallacy."

" Oh, don't think of me," said Parthenope, with an abnegation of self which was emphasised by a closer gathering together of the lace under her chin. " I am off in an instant. I only stayed up to hear your adventures, and tell you mine."

" Yours ? " repeated Mrs. Henley, pausing in surprise, with her hand on the curtain, " what possible adventures can you have had ? "

In her tone was a quite unconscious streak of the contemptuous old belief that nothing very interesting could connect itself with Parthenope.

The bride recognised this with some pique : and her response was almost pert.

" That is all you know about it. If I have not had exactly an adventure I have had a visitor."

" Who ? " asked Miss Crisp, coming forwards from the back of the room where she had been freeing her head from the light wrappings which the night drive in an open taxi had rendered expedient.

There was a little eager catch in her voice.

" Ah ! That is telling," replied her niece, with one of her untimely accessions of playfulness, " wouldn't you like to know ?—well, I won't keep you in suspense ; it was poor Jack Cameron."

There were three listeners to this announcement, but only two ejaculations followed it.

" He came to say good-bye," proceeded Mrs. Willy Steele, with a gently melancholy modulation that was yet compatible with some enjoyment of being for the moment the pivot on which the whole attention of her audience turned ; " he was so sorry to miss you all, and it was a pity ; though perhaps, poor fellow, in a way it was best for him."

She stopped to heave a sigh, but as no one spoke she continued :

"He suggested waiting for you, but I dissuaded him. I told him that it was quite uncertain when you would return, in point of fact it was a surprise to me when you walked in so early."

"So you drove him away?" Mrs. Henley observed, with a harsh little laugh. "Well," with a philosophic shrug, "it will all be the same a hundred years hence, and good-bye is a disagreeable word nowadays."

"That was exactly what I felt," returned Parthenope in eager self-justification. "I thought that I would do Susannah a good turn; as I know that she hates farewell scenes. I told him so, that was what decided him not to wait."

"Then," returned Susannah's mother, in a tone of gruff disapproval of the triumphantly announced finesse in question, "if he were at all a coxcomb, which he is not in the least, poor boy, you would have led him to believe that Susannah's feelings would not allow her to take leave of him. I cannot say that I think she has much cause to be grateful to you."

"Oh, how ready you are to misjudge me!" exclaimed the other in indignant disclaimer, and with a new and married-woman tone of "standing up" to her elder. "I explained to him so clearly that it was because she was so kind-hearted and averse from giving pain, that she shrank from taking leave of people when she could not honestly pretend to be as much cut up as they were. Oh, I made my meaning perfectly plain; if you had seen his face you would not have doubted that he understood."

There was a short silence which even the self-satisfied trumpeter of her own achievement could not feel to be one of approbation. It was broken by Mrs. Henley who with one of her most emphatic snorts of disapproval uttered the following discourteous words:

"You have made a mess of it, as you mostly do. We should all have liked to bid him God-speed."

Having thus delivered her soul, she stalked out of the room.

At once the bride began to whimper. "How unjust your mother always is to me," she cried, addressing Susannah's back which at the end of Mrs. Steele's last sentence had been turned upon her; the girl going over as her mother had done to the moon-flooded window; where she now stood looking out.

Without turning round, she answered in a tone that had none of the buoyant-lilt characteristic of her usual speech:

"I should like to have bidden Jack good-bye."

The other at once threw herself into an attitude of injured self-defence. "You at least have no right to reproach me. I did it entirely for your sake."

Miss Henley moved slowly round. Her hands were tightly clasped together, and her bright blue eyes wore an unfamiliar look of cloudy distress not untouched with indignation.

"*For my sake?*"

"Yes," retorted Parthenope, self-complacency at her own achievement dissolving into angry misgiving. "Yes, for your sake. Is it possible that you forget saying how disagreeable it was making adieux to people who expected you to be so much sorrier than you could manage to be. You said it to Aunt Judith when Mr. Issacher burst out crying in the summer-house."

At this circumstantial reporting of her former dictum, a light of recollection but also of sharp apprehension dawned in Susannah's face.

"That was over a year ago," she answered in an odd constrained voice; "and as you say it was about Mr. Issacher that I said it. Is it possible——" her words beginning to hurry and tumble over each other, "that you gave Jack the impression that I said it lately and about *him*?"

Parthenope's white invalidish face took a deeper hue than health ever decked it in as in an explanatory but still injured key she took up her own defence.

"I did not think it necessary to go into any detail of time or place; I merely told him what I believed—what I had every reason to believe to be, your deliberate opinion.

I did it," taking out her pocket-handkerchief, "for the best."

It was a plea that had often been offered and as often accepted by the sweet-tempered easy-going Susannah, when one of her companion's unfortunate "repeatings" had sown discord in her little circle. To-day she only answered icily: "Did you? Then there is no more to be said!" And so left the room, and the crestfallen though still self-righteous bride.

CHAPTER LII

"SHE really is gone," Laura Steele announced, stooping to release from the leash, that his outrages had lately rendered necessary, her bulldog, and giving the information to her mother who was passing through the hall, and to her eldest sister who was lackadaisically unfurling an *En Tout Cas* in preparation for crossing the sunburnt sward to the hammock in which she oscillated away the summer hours.

"I met the taxi just at the corner of the post-box ; I recognised her new boxes almost before they were in sight by the immense P.S.'s on them. Miss Crisp was with her. I suppose that she is still considered too invalidish to travel alone !"

"I am afraid," said Mrs. Steele, putting her head a good deal on one side, as was always her way in any minor mental distress, and speaking in a way that hinted at compunction, "that we ought to have gone to see her a little oftener."

"I do dislike paying visits to people in bed," put in Rosamund in her somnolent voice, "I never wish anyone to come and see me when I am ill." Then she drifted away towards the hammock, picture papers, and nap which filled the June forenoon. The neglect which her mother-in-law had confessed with tepid remorse had been noticed but treated in a beautifully Christian spirit by its victim.

"I am afraid that there is still a little jealousy," she had confided with regretful complacency to her aunt, "but I shall never be content till I have conquered it. I mean to make him nicer to them than he ever was before—uncongenial as they are."

After her eldest daughter's disappearance Mrs. Steele

still lingered in the hall. Her head inclining more than ever towards her left shoulder.

"Last time that I saw her," she remarked, with a sort of dawdling protest, "she asked my leave to call me mother. Of course I had to consent. I can't think what she wants with two mothers! She has one in Dorsetshire already."

"I suppose she thinks that one can't have too much of a good thing," drily suggested Mr. Steele who had just sauntered in with his hat on. "Poor little wretch, I caught sight of her just now, as she went past; she looked very much washed out."

"I am afraid that she will turn out to be radically sickly," said his wife pessimistically, "if so it will be just like our luck."

"It is to be hoped that they will not have any children," observed Laura who had sometimes a directness of speech with regard to physiological problems which would have woke up any family less profoundly asleep than hers. "Parthenope's nerves and his eyes and legs would make a dreadful combination."

Both parents regretfully acquiesced in this gloomy forecast; and then the little group broke up.

Upon Grays a peace had descended, which ought to have been a cheerful one, considering that it resulted from the removal of what Mrs. Henley openly—at least in relieved expansiveness to her daughter—and the other two inwardly—admitted to have been an incubus.

It was curious that the rebound from Parthenope after this last week seemed greater than that which had followed upon the previous ten years. Yet the atmosphere of the gay little villa, which ought to have been so bright, had to-day a weight about it which was quite unaccounted for by the weather conditions.

Mrs. Henley had indeed one good moment, that in which, shaking her fist in the direction of the Bungalow, she had cried out: "Next time they shall have her. Ten kitchen ranges shall not save them."

But in other respects her morning could not be con-

sidered a quite satisfactory one. The Truce of God which had reigned for several days between her and Jackson, owing probably to her mind having been distracted from the garden by other matters, was rent to tatters by the discovery of the hopeless mislaying by the luckless artist of the large hairpins destined to pin down the just-bedded-out verbenas. Though he sought for them with his usual futile diligence—Jackson never *appeared* to be idle—in every place where they were certain not to be, his mistress's wrath remained unappeased, and the garden soon rang with the familiar strain of : " Jackson, you are the greatest ass that God ever put breath into," and with the ready but not disarming assent : " Yes, Miss."

Judith Crisp had chaperoned her niece only to the railway station. She had offered to escort so recent an invalid to London and see her settled in her apartment, but Parthenope had refused with grateful firmness.

" It is just of a piece with your lifelong unselfishness to offer it," she had responded in her usual exaggerated acknowledgment and accompanying her words with the old twining performance round her reluctant relation, " but I want my husband to realise that I am no silly helpless little Miss,—but a woman well able to look after herself. With all these roses," looking round upon the glorious rainbow bunch, which had been culled for her from the garden's limitless plenty of bloom, " I shall be able to make our London lodging-house room into a perfect bower, and it will be such a happiness to do it."

Judith had acquiesced with relief ; and having watched the train steam out of the station and her niece's elated pale face and neatly gloved small claw showing themselves at the window in conscientious affection till the latest possible moment turned away, and with a lightened though not exactly light heart toiled her way home again up the blazing hill.

Her first care on reaching the cool haven of the house, which seemed to have taken on such a much greater access of peace than the departure of one small inmate could

account for, was to go in search of Susannah. The proximity of her young friend was always delightful to her, and it had been with her a habit in past years to seek and always obtain from that level-headed girlish counsellor tonic words of encouragement as to the unimportance of her own niece's shortcomings.

To Susannah she had also invariably brought the wounds inflicted by her coadjutor's rough tongue, in order to have the unguent of her bracing sympathy laid upon them.

To-day, however, it was no distress of her own which sent Miss Crisp in quest of her favourite, but rather a vague wish to assure herself that all was as well as usual with Susannah, her equanimity as complete and her disposition to "daff the world aside and let it pass," as perfect as she had always known it to be, since her robust childish joyousness had made her new home "ring again."

Susannah was in the schoolroom, the sole and undisputed ownership of which henceforth might have been supposed to send up her spirits with a run. For some reason she had brought her work home to-day instead of executing it at the hospital, and was presumably plying her needle with her usual diligence; yet as Judith turned the handle of the door, she had the impression of a figure leaning idly back in its chair with a neglected garment in a heap on its lap. But when Miss Crisp found herself inside the room, there was no such figure to be seen, only a girl assiduously bending over the button-holes of a pyjama.

CHAPTER LIII

MISS HENLEY looked up at the visitor with a deceptive implication of having her labours broken in upon, and Judith tactfully played up while a vague and unusual sense of pity—Susannah so seldom needed compassion—stirred about her heart.

“Well, have you sped the parting guest?” The question was as commonplace as it well could be. What was *uncommon* was the faint flavour of acridness in the voice that uttered it.

Judith nodded.

“Yes, she went off very comfortably; the carriage was not too crowded and the guard promised to look after her at Waterloo.”

The person to whom this reassuring information was addressed allowed herself the indulgence of a sigh of relief, which spoke a more open and candid satisfaction in the absence of the just departed one than Miss Crisp’s memory could furnish her with any previous example of. It spoke of such a new departure, that for a minute or two the elder woman kept a startled silence. Then she sat down beside Susannah and picking up one sleeve of the pyjama began idly to fidget with it.

“We have had a trying time of it,” she said deprecatingly. “All the brunt of it has fallen upon you. I feel that I have not half thanked you.”

“Fiddlesticks!” interrupted the girl with a brusque bluntness, which was reminiscent of her parent. Then seeing the look of hurt surprise on her old friend’s face, she fell in pretty apology on her knees beside her, and said in almost her natural tone of rallying affection:

“You dear old goose! Is it at this time of day that

you and I are going to sit up and *make strange* with each other ? ”

There was a slight unsteadiness in Miss Crisp's voice as she replied : “ For the moment I did not recognise you.”

Susannah laughed, sitting back on her heels, and her laugh was as her speech had been, almost normal. “ You thought that *I* had turned into Mother and *you* into Jackson.”

But the old friend's feelings were still ruffled. “ I thought that you must be rather off colour,” she answered with a shade of stiffness.

“ Off colour,” repeated the girl, still struggling to maintain—though it was clearly a struggle—the playful key in which her last mocking speech had been pitched, “ you are growing quite slangy. I really can't allow it.”

Then something seemed to give way inside her ; and with an entire change of tone she sighed, clasping her hands in Judith's lap, and stooping her sheeny head upon them.

“ *I am* off colour, but you ought not to have noticed it.”

Miss Crisp took the reproach in meek silence, and Susannah, as if yielding to a most unwonted impulse towards expansiveness, lifted her bent face and said in a low voice :

“ I should have liked to have bid the poor boy good-bye. Wouldn't you ? ”

For a minute or two the elder woman did not respond. Through her mind raced the thought—a mere platitude—of how very little one knows of the always island souls that live alongside and closest to us. Was this the cold bright Susannah about whose capacity for loving anyone she herself in her warm old heart had such pinching doubts ? It was with an unconvinced and unconvincing obliquity that she answered :

“ Try to believe that she did it for the best.”

Susannah sat looking straight before her, with her level brows knitted, and by and by brought out with a touch of dry humour :

"I wish that for a change she would give us the worst next time."

Miss Crisp sighed. To have to defend Parthenope against Susannah, who had always hitherto been her apologist and the palliator of her blabbings and indiscretions, was a strange and painful development. But the aspiration expressed found such an echo in her own heart, that she could find nothing better to answer with than the bald advice :

"You must write and explain to him how it happened ; you don't remember the Boer War, I suppose, but this one has at least the superiority over it that letters come and go almost as quickly as they do at home. If you write to him at once he will not be kept long in suspense."

The person to whom this advice was addressed could not be said to jump at it. She pondered it for awhile with a troubled air, and then said doubtfully, "I think I had better not. It might give him a wrong impression," and after a minute's further musing she added, looking up slowly into her senior's face : "It would be difficult to explain that to wish to say a friendly good-bye to him and to wish to marry him are not the same thing."

It was a return to the "Ice Queen" attitude, and Judith felt chilled. Possibly the girl was conscious of the impression she had produced or had misgivings as to its accuracy, for she said presently and in a different key :

"I will tell him when he comes back. It is most likely that he will come back ; *you* feel as if he would come *back*, don't you ?"

The eyes that her poor Jack had so often qualified to himself as pools of ice were turned full in their large blueness on her companion ; but a keen and undisguised anxiety for the answer looked out of them in place of their frosty brightness.

"I am quite certain that he will," cried Judith rashly, with a crack in her old voice.

Meanwhile his mother, poor Milady, was not sure, and she walked about her garden, which thanks to a disobliging landlord she had not even the distraction of

turning topsy-turvy and inside out, walked about in a cold frenzy of fear, asking herself how it was possible that this second severance should be so far more unbearable than the first, which at its time had seemed to reach the apex of the unendurable.

In her heart she cavilled at her husband's ability to eat his dinner on the day of Jack's departure, telling herself how incomparably less his suffering was than hers. *It was* in a way, since his was a naturally sanguine temper which always thought it more likely that good would happen to him than evil.

His boy was doing merely what everybody else's boy was ; he must take his chance like the rest. Yet Milady need not have grudged him the apparent relish with which he ate and drank his fillet and his whiskey and soda.

A good many suppressed sighs were swallowed with both ; and she did not realise the difficulty with which he framed the tender little jests which were meant to soften but now only unjustly angered her. Towards her acquaintances her behaviour was more creditable. She went among them with a serenity which gave the impression of wanting to ward off enquiries, and rebut sympathy.

Her boy had bidden her " not to make a fuss " about his going to anyone, and she felt it a religious duty to obey him.

Dying injunctions were always attended to, and it was useless to disguise from herself the probability of these requests of his coming under that head. He had also enjoined upon her to be kind to Susannah, and she would do that too.

What was more she would not delay embarking on that arduous duty. Distasteful tasks were always best tackled at once.

CHAPTER LIV

"Don't you think," suggested Sir Edward looking up from his kedgeree and across to his wife at breakfast one morning, about a week after Jack's departure, "that you have had about enough of the garden for the present. Shan't I order the car for you to go somewhere this afternoon?"

He spoke deprecatingly as if not knowing—which indeed he did not—how she would take this proposal; and she slowly buttering a bit of toast, which she seemed to have no intention of ultimately eating, did not at once reply. Then she said in reluctant assent:

"Yes, there is no use in putting off the evil day. I had better get it over."

"Get what over?" asked he puzzled, and inwardly wondering whether she would be annoyed if he asked her to pour him out a second cup of coffee, as he had already divined that his healthy appetite, which, as he ruefully told himself, was his misfortune not his fault, was a stumbling-block to her.

"My visit to my future daughter-in-law," answered she, with a bitter little smile. "You know I told Jack that I would be nice to her, and I am a woman of my word, am I not?"

She seemed to await his answer with anxiety, as if her belief in herself needed the support of his confirmation.

Her wistful appeal touched him very much, and made him forget his empty coffee cup.

"You always *mean* to be at all events," he said, with gentle and playful evasion. Then seeing her look deeply disappointed, he hastened to add seriously: "In this case

I know that you will do your very best. The only danger is that you might *overdo* it."

A few minutes later, with a farewell pat on her shoulder and flying kiss on the top of her head he was off, coffeeless and unmurmuring, to his daily grind at the War Office. Men are usually, from habit and education, much more selfish than women, but there could be no doubt—though neither of them in the least suspected it—that Sir Edward was much more unselfish than Milady.

"*Overdo it!*" She sat thinking over his counsel after he had gone. Was there any danger of her being excessive in her demonstrations of affection to a person against whom her dislike and indignation had been sensibly enhanced, since their last meeting? Her boy had not been able to hide from her—as he had certainly meant and wished to do—the reason why he had not awaited the return of the Grays party from the Hospital Concert: under her probing questions, he had even been driven to repeat the phrase retailed by Parthenope and which she had omitted to explain as having been applied by Susannah to a totally different person, at a long previous period.

He had bitterly repented his admission as soon as she had extracted it from him, and though he was to set off early the next morning, had unwisely kept vigil with his mother into the small hours, trying to reason and coax away the effect of his words. In the anguish of the imminent parting, she had it is true renewed her promise of being "kind" to Susannah, but ever since his departure, had she not been trying to settle with her conscience how little that word might be construed to mean. *Overdo* looks and words of affection to the presumptuous ingrate, who had openly proclaimed her impatience of having to feign sorrow at taking leave of one whose absence had for Milady darkened the sun, and turned Life into dust and ashes.

Yet, as she pondered more upon Sir Edward's words she began to perceive dimly at first—then more distinctly that there might be some truth and wisdom in them. There mostly turned out to be a tincture of truth in the lightly

and never dogmatically thrown-out suggestions and hints with which he sometimes tried delicately to straighten some erratic course of hers.

In conquering the enormous difficulty of being decently civil to a person so repugnant to her, was it not conceivable that she might fall into the error of some excessive demonstration which could not carry conviction to the most credulous ? Never had she approached Grays with such reluctance, and as she neared the house, she kept testing on her mental palate a variety of words, looks, gestures, which might strike a balance between the candid expression of her real aversion, and any exaggerated conveyance of the impression of that warm friendliness which she was bound by her given word to offer.

Her powers of dissimulation were not to be put to an immediate test, however ; as she noticed with relief on seeing only the two seniors sitting at tea under the now uninteresting dull green double cherry trees. Towards them, at all events, she had given no pledge to be lovable ; and her strung nerves unbent, as she caught sight of them sipping their tea in quiet elderly duct. Neither of them looked particularly cheerful. That was a point in their favour ; and their faces, though kind and welcoming, were not over-charged with sympathy. To try to apply balm to her wound, or to ignore it, would have been equally an offence to her, and they did neither. Questions and answers were exchanged upon Parthenope's prematurely ended honeymoon and her illness ; and Mrs. Henley, mounting her hobby, cantered away happily upon it, i.e. on the immense disadvantages of honeymoons in general, and the signal good fortune of the couple in question in having theirs compulsorily abridged.

"It was really providential," she ended piously, and the visitor gave an absent assent. In point of fact she did not hear a word of her companion's psalm in dispraise of Hymen.

Not since the wedding had she been at Grays, and memory was bringing her many cruel little parcels of pain,

as she recalled those incidents of the day which had related to Jack. The sight of the porch whence so many of the multitudinous roses had now dropped their petals brought back to her the pang she had felt, when, sitting in her car on the edge of departure, she had heard from her son's lips of his resolution not to return with her, but to stay behind, in humble hope of having crumbs of kindness scornfully thrown him by her who never did, had, or would, appreciate in any degree the privilege and joy of his dear company. Her bitter musings were brought to a sudden end by the cessation of Mrs. Henley's voice, who having disowned and trampled on the God of Love, with no one attempting to hinder her, had lapsed into satisfied silence, and then began to speak on the subject which had hitherto been banned. It would have remained so if Judith had been alone with the guest, but her colleague's treatment of other people's emotions was apt to be as direct and primitive as that to which she subjected her own, so she said in a key of moderate friendly concern :

"We were so sorry to miss saying good-bye to Jack the night that he came here. It was the more unlucky, as since the War, we have not been out in the evening once in a blue moon."

Milady's face stiffened. "Perhaps it was as well, since I hear—I am told that you—some of you—are bored by farewells from your friends."

"Some of us," returned Mrs. Henley, with faint indications of rising colour in her repetition of the words, "I suppose that you mean Susannah, but that was all Parthenope's nonsense ! If people are not as sentimental and high-flown as herself, she at once concludes that they are destitute of all human feeling ! Susannah was very sorry not to have had the chance of wishing the poor lad God-speed. Weren't you, Sue ?"

For at this moment Miss Henley appeared on the scene.

CHAPTER LV

THE ordeal had begun. To an observer ignorant of the *Dessous des cartes*, it would not have seemed a very severe one merely to salute with an amiable look, and a few welcoming words, the eminently attractive young creature, at the sight of whom most people broke into an involuntary smile of pleasure, and who now unobtrusively added herself to the party. It was at once patent to the three persons who formed it that Susannah was not herself. The glad certainty of pleasing because she was always ready to be pleased, which was so characteristic of her, was quite absent from her manner, and it was a hesitating shy girl who held out a hand not quite sure of being accepted to the relentless critic felt to be before her.

But Milady had conned her lesson too well not to make a determined try towards putting it in practice ; and while resolutely enjoining upon herself " not to overdo it," she pressed Susannah's hand with unnecessary fervency, and cried, in a tone that sounded to herself unctuously insincere :

" I was afraid that I was going to miss you altogether."

The troubled surprise evoked in the eyes of the person addressed told Milady that after all she *had* overdone it ! Perhaps it was due to her own fancy that she seemed to hear a little gasp of astonishment at her demonstration from the two elders. She dropped Susannah's hand, and turned away from her just as the girl was beginning to proffer an explanation with less than her usual pretty confidence in its adequacy.

" I would have come out earlier if I had known that——" She broke off (" if I had known that you would care to see me," was an inexpedient verity ; and " if I had known that you were here," would have been a lie).

So her sentence hung in mid-air, which mattered the less since Lady Cameron's back was definitely presented to her.

The visitor had thrown herself into conversation with Mrs. Henley, and listened without hearing a word of it to the latter lady's warm indictment of the Steele family for their want of hospitality in interposing a kitchen range between themselves and their daughter-in-law.

All the while the apparent listener was saying to herself: "Now I am under-doing it! I am not keeping my promise. I ought to say something kind to her. What shall it be? Praise her gown? But I have seen it so often. Ask her if they want more swabs at the Hospital? There would not be anything particularly kind in that. She is not so red in the face as she generally is. Shall I tell her that she is looking pale? Yes, that will show an interest. I am almost sure that he would like me to do that."

A cessation of the sound of her interlocutor's voice told her that Mrs. Henley's vituperative eloquence had run dry; and she took the opportunity, before her good resolution failed, to bring Susannah again within her range of vision, and say with what she hoped to be just the right shade of solicitude:

"Have you been over-doing yourself like the rest of the world? I am afraid that your pale cheeks look rather like it?"

Once again that sense of astonishment in her hearers pervaded the atmosphere. Susannah was the first to recover from it. She put up her hands to her face which had suddenly recovered more than its normal rosiness, and cried in a rather trembling gay tone, which tried to be normal too:

"Am I pale? I am so glad. I always admire pale people."

Milady was pale, and the doubt at once crossed her mind as to whether this was not a shabby attempt to propitiate her.

Altogether it was not with complete self-approval that Lady Cameron looked back upon her visit as she whirled

home. To the credit of her account was the fact that she had made a spasmodic overture towards embracing Miss Henley at parting, an attempt which had been gracefully countered by Susannah's laying a respectful kiss upon Milady's glove. But had she been really kind? Would Jack have thought her really kind? She certainly had not felt so.

A few days later Judith Crisp announced her intention of going up to London for the night.

"What a pity it is," she observed reflectively to her house-mates, "that one's accessories don't last as long as one's main body. I can no longer avoid facing the fact that I must have a new *ratelier*. It will be a long job, so I shall sleep at the Club, and combine a visit to Parthenope and Willy. I am rather anxious to see how they are getting on."

"I shall be amused to hear," replied Mrs. Henley, pausing for a moment from her employment of prodding plantains out of the turf; and though Miss Crisp did not quite relish the latent derision of the young menage which might be read into the answer, she abstained from comment upon it. Her dentist and the allurements of Selfridge's Sale detained her so long that it was six-thirty in the evening before she found herself pressing the electric bell at Parthenope's lodgings, and being let in by a rather dubious maid.

"Mrs. Steele was at home? yes, but she was not very well. Mr. Steele? Yes, he had just come back."

Despite this admission there seemed some difficulty about him too, and when the visitor at length succeeded in reaching the little lodging-house drawing-room, she found it empty, and was left to contemplate its bad modern prints and pseudo-Chippendale furniture during some minutes, before any one joined her.

It was the husband, not the wife, who ultimately put in an appearance; his countenance was as much ruffled as his hair, which gave the idea of troubled hands having been lately run through it.

"I am in London for a night, so I thought I would come and look you up," explained Judith, with a rather anxious cheerfulness. "Where is Parthenope?"

His hands showed a tendency to revert to his troubled locks, and his face was cloudy.

"She is not up yet."

The visitor glanced at the pretentious timepiece on the chimney-piece which was not going.

"Not up! Why it is nearly seven o'clock. Is she ill?"

He answered with gloomy embarrassment: "She is not very well. She had a bad night."

"A bad night? She is generally a good sleeper."

"Is she?" with detachment. "Well, she was not last night. She never closed an eye. Something upset her, and she cried all night."

"Good Heavens, why?"

A shocked and startled intonation in his new aunt-in-law's voice seemed to impel the purveyor of this dismal piece of news to a sudden confidence.

"Won't you sit down?" he asked, with unintentionally tardy hospitality, "I am afraid that none of the chairs are very comfortable,—and I will tell you how it happened. I am sure that it was the last thing I intended."

With a qualm of misgiving the hearer seated herself upon the nearest chair of the Art Suite, and with what sounded like an accent of relief at having somebody to whom to make a clean breast of it, the bridegroom began his narrative.

CHAPTER LVI

HE prefaced it with a heavy sigh, which the innocent opening of his communication did not seem to warrant.

"We dined out last night, which is not at all what Parthe wished. She complains that she already sees so very little of me, and I—well as you know I am not at all fitted for general society."

He paused long enough for his companion to have made a sound of civil dissent, but she was too full of uneasy apprehension to do so, and he went on, uncheered by contradiction of his self-depreciation.

"I asked her to make an exception in favour of last night, and she did so though not willingly. The invitation was to dine at the Carlton with my Baliol friend Granger—the man who tried to get that unlucky article of mine, 'The Bursting of the Reservoirs' into the 'Round Table.' He did not succeed, because it was such an inherently rotten piece of writing, and I see now that he must have thought it so when he undertook to make the attempt. However, he did his best, and I felt a real obligation to him, the more so as it involved him in some disagreeableness with the rest of the Committee."

Once again the speaker paused as if nearing, and at the same time shrinking from the most ticklish passage of his story, then went on with distempered haste :

"He had several pleasant people to meet us, and Parthenope sat by him at dinner. I never have been able to persuade her that it was not his fault that the wretched thing had been refused, and—if you'll believe it," with a sudden violent bid for sympathy, "she took the opportunity his very hospitality gave her, to rate him for it."

Another pause, caused apparently half by a tendency to

choking indignation, half by a desire to see the effect of the climax on his auditor. Whatever it might be it did not express itself in words and the young man took up his tale again heavily.

"After dinner he told me about it. Of course he thought she had been inspired by me. He was naturally very much annoyed, and said how sorry he was that I had suspected him of slackness in furthering my interests, but that in point of fact he had done his very best; nothing could have been nicer or more delicate than the way in which he expressed himself, but I could see that he was deeply wounded, and of course it will never again be the same thing between us."

He broke off, and began restlessly to fidget with a large framed photograph of himself, which, pen in hand and sheet of MS. outspread, stared unkindly at him from an "occasional" table at his elbow.

"Did you scold Parthe about it? Was it that which upset her?" enquired Judith faintly.

"Scold her!" repeated he in a tone of acute injury. "I don't know what you call scolding, but I naturally told her what I thought of her—her performance. I tried to keep myself within bounds and not to say anything—excessive, but I must say that she took it in very bad part—very bad part indeed."

The speaker had worked himself up into such a fume that the palliation presently offered by the culprit's aunt was tendered very diffidently.

"She could not bear to think of your being undervalued, having such a high opinion of your literary gift as she has."

The ointment thus applied to the wound seemed rather to exacerbate than sooth it.

"Heaven knows where she got it from," he cried, with impatient soreness, "certainly not from me! Oh, yes, of course she meant well. I told her so just now in hopes of stopping her crying, but it had not the slightest effect."

"Is she crying still?" enquired Miss Crisp feebly.

"She was when I left her just now. As I told you, she cried all night; she has been crying ever since. I remonstrated with her in the taxi."

This deplorable picture of a bride converted into a fountain paralysed both tongues for a while. Then Miss Crisp said dejectedly :

"She will make herself ill."

"I told her that too," rejoined Parthenope's husband, "but it was no use. She answered as well as I could understand her, for she was sobbing so much as to be hardly intelligible, that she 'hoped she should.'"

The deliberate desperation of this aspiration again threw Mrs. Willy Steele's two relations on their beam ends, and an unsuggestive blank silence supervened, broken at last by the young man, who had risen from his chair, and was limping about the room; a posture in which he apparently found it easier to make the suggestion of which he presently delivered himself.

"I think that she gets morbid being so much alone. Poor thing, she is always complaining of how little she sees of me, though sometimes—when she is reasonable she acknowledges that it is not my fault, that it is unavoidable!"

He paused, in evident hesitation over the point he was approaching, and his hearer awaited its arrival with vague dread. Then it came.

"It has struck me that disliking so very much, as she does, being alone, she might be happier—it might be better for her—to be back—in the country—among the people she has been used to all her life," then seeing that at his unfolded project an expression nothing less than aghast had spread itself over his companion's countenance he added precipitately : "of course I mean only for a time—a short time until her—her—health is more established—till she is less morbid and hysterical!"

A deeper red than her usual sexagenarian blush had spread over Judith's face. Then ebbed into white dismay.

"Am I to understand," she asked in a key of the deepest mortification, "that you are proposing to return Parthenope upon our hands after less than a month? I understood that you had taken her 'for better, for worse.'"

At this indictment the colour flooded Steele's sallow face and he cried in shamed haste: "Of course I did, and I—I have not the least intention of going back from it. I only wished to do what is best for—for her happiness. I suggested it merely as a temporary expedient, so that she might be less lonely until—until I have more time to devote to her."

"And when will that be?" enquired Judith, fixing eyes that even through large round spectacles looked unpleasantly searching upon his, "at the end of the War?"

To that he could respond only by an indistinct mumble, but it was presently clear to his companion that despite having been so completely nonplussed, he was still loth to relinquish his project.

"If you don't care to—I mean if it is inconvenient to you to have her, she might go for a bit to my people."

Miss Crisp's lip, which had been trembling, curled:

"Might she? I cannot say that they showed any great eagerness to have her when she offered herself the other day."

This was so patently true, and its effect was written in such deep and dumb mortification upon the conjugal victim's features that the accusing figure before him presently took on a less awful air.

"I have always heard," it said, with an almost compassionate leniency, "that the first year of married life is invariably the most difficult. You must not take too much to heart—lay too much stress upon a little tiff."

"A little tiff," repeated he, with withering emphasis, "I only wish that you could see her!"

CHAPTER LVII

"It does take it out of one," Judith admitted on the morning after her return to Grays, in answer to an observation made by Susannah on the peakiness of appearance which she had brought back from her outing, "my visit to the dentist was a mere flea-bite in comparison. However," with an effort at cheerfulness, "they were all right when I left them; sitting on the same chair, and just going into dinner, and Parthe promised faithfully to eat and not to cry any more. But oh! my dear, you have no idea what an object she had made of herself. It was enough to choke off the strongest love."

The two women were alone at the breakfast-table, from which Mrs. Henley had hastily absented herself on receipt of a lamentable message from Jackson, excusing his absence; and announcing the agonies that he was suffering from lumbago; and his employer had set forth with curses on her lips and Pond's Extract in her hand to track him to his lair; and convict him of malingering or apply one of the very few remedies in the whole of the Pharmacopeia whose efficacy she admitted, as the occasion seemed to demand.

"I suppose that they will shake down in time," Susannah said.

Her elbow was resting on the table; she was balancing her teaspoon idly between two fingers; and she spoke without the contagious conviction with which she had so often propped the rickety fabric of Miss Crisp's appreciation of her niece.

That lady shook her head despondently.

"Of course mine is not an expert opinion," she remarked, with a dry laugh, "but I have always been told that in

marriage there is the tendency for the man to cool down, and the woman to warm up."

The girl laughed too, and more drily. "That would be impossible in the case of Parthenope, she is a hundred in the shade already."

Her companion glanced at her anxiously. Bitterness was the last ingredient to mingle in Susannah's glad and kindly speech, but there was more than a touch of acridness in her last utterance. There was no doubt that Susannah was changed. As Milady had unkindly phrased it to herself, she was not so red in the face as she had been. The lilt had gone out of her voice, and the spring out of her gait, except when feeling that their absence was being noticed she tried to reintroduce them artificially.

There was a painfully obvious effort to recover the tone that had been wont to come so naturally in her next speech.

"Why are you staring so stonily at me? Are you thinking what a cattish remark that last one was? And it had not even the excuse of being dictated by envy. I have no wish to be two hundred in the shade."

There was an odd touch of defiance in her voice; and an answering streak of wonder in her companion's retort.

"Certainly no one has ever hitherto been able to accuse you of it, but 'Let him that thinketh he standeth,' etc. One never knows what one may come to."

"That is true, though trite," returned the girl, with a whiff of her old light impertinence, "but I think I should put up a good fight before I reached that stage of imbecility."

"If you'll believe it," cried Mrs. Henley, making an irruption into the room at this point, with the flush of battle and of the July sun on her cheek, "he was digging up his own early potatoes and as well as you or I! Of course he pretended that he had been writhing in agony all night, and begged me to leave the 'Ponds' with him; but I knew better than that."

She sank exhausted but triumphant into a chair and

her daughter relieved her of her jacket, rebuked her for having rushed out into the high road gloveless, and gently assured her that she would have a fit if she indulged in such evil passions in the dog days.

It was mid-July now; the roses were mostly over. "The High Midsummer Poms" were moving past with ever accelerated pace; mignonette—one of the few flowers whose scent has not yet been improved away—was asserting its supremacy of perfume, but the garden was beginning to look droughty, and had no longer the exhilarating fresh loveliness of its earlier prime. A sort of heaviness brooded over the place that had seemed so invincibly gay. Lady Cameron's conscience had not left her very comfortable as to her performance of her boy's behest, after her last visit. Standing at the bar of her own judgment she had to confess that it had been but a shabby carrying out of her promise. There was nothing for it but to repeat the experiment, and put her back more into it. So with nerves strung up and rehearsing affectionate set phrases she twice called again at short intervals at Grays.

On neither occasion was there any need for the display of her wares of factitious tenderness; since upon both her *bête noire* was absent; and though the fact brought undoubted relief, yet she felt an unjust and illogical access of dislike to Susannah for having been the cause of her wasted feats of self-sacrifice.

"One might as well have no daughter," Mrs. Henley had said grumblingly in answer to the visitor's enquiries, "for all the good that one gets out of them nowadays."

"Did not someone say that children are avenues to misfortune?" asked Milady pensively; while absently pulling the flowers out of one vase and transferring them to another, in her inveterate passion for change.

But at that Susannah's mother, scenting an insult, began faintly to bristle.

"I will not go so far as that. I should be grossly ungrateful if I called Sue an 'Avenue to misfortune,' but I wish she had not taken it into her head that she was not

doing enough War work. She is slaving for ever so many more hours at the Y.M.C.A. Canteen. Three nights in the week she is not back till eleven o'clock."

"How good of her," commented Milady, seizing upon this opportunity for a cheap civility, which would probably be reported to its object, and might go to the credit side of her own account. It was so much easier to be "nice" to Susannah, when she was not there.

For a minute or two she paused, looking round the room for a glass to which she could transfer the tall pale blue delphinium suffused with pink which had been the culminating beauty of a bouquet lately arranged by Miss Crisp, and at whose destruction she now looked on in anguished but silent protest.

"Don't be angry with me," the visitor said airily, "but you really have no eye for colour, my dear." Then seeing and grasping an opportunity for another inexpensive compliment, "you should leave the flowers to Susannah. She has a real genius for arranging them."

"She never has time for anything of that sort now," Mrs. Henley said, softened as always by any tribute to her daughter, "the War eats up one's children that stay at home as much as it does the ones that go. Not," with a hasty recapture of her habitual attitude of sturdy patriotism "not, God knows, that one grudges them."

At the mention of the omniverous monster whose jaws were ever open to swallow her boy, Lady Cameron's lip began to quiver; but happily for her at the same moment her eye hit upon an abuse which cried even more loudly for correction than the bunch of delphiniums.

"How can you stand the scent of those Mary lilies," she ejaculated, indicating a great trophy that decorated and dignified one corner of the room, "it makes me feel quite faint. Do you mind my moving them into the hall? The vase is so heavy! Will you help me, Judith?"

CHAPTER LVIII

"I DON'T see how we are to get out of having her this time!" Mrs. Steele said, letting fall in her lap a letter from her son Willy which she had just been reading aloud, and looking round upon her family with an appeal for help, which was not at first forthcoming, "you see he says that the Zeppelin raid has upset her so frightfully!"

"They seem to have done a great deal of damage in the City!" observed the father of the family, pausing in the perusal of his paper, to make this communication to his belongings.

No comment upon it followed, except a distressful murmur from Rosamund. "Oh, don't tell us anything about it!"

Mrs. Steele picked up the unwelcome missive again. "You see he says that her nerves are in ribbons—it is *ribbons*, isn't it?" holding out the passage for inspection to Laura, who was sitting next her.

"Yes, it *is* ribbons!" replied the girl, adding with a note of incredulity, "and she is willing to leave him?"

"Oh, no, she isn't," corrected her mother, again glancing at the sheet; "she knows nothing about it; in fact he asks me to direct my answer to his office!"

"He will never succeed in shaking her off!" returned Willy's favourite sister gloomily, "if you remember when you invited her down to luncheon, she refused on the ground that though she could not be with him, she could at least feel that she was in the same town with him!"

"He is really very touching, poor boy!" remarked Mrs. Steele in a quasi-relenting voice, "he says that it is the greatest kindness we could do him!"

"I suppose," suggested Daisy, speaking for the first time, "that you would not like to try Grays again?"

"I don't see how *I could!*" answered her mother regretfully; "do you, George?"

Mr. Steele was never cross when he was interrupted by his family; and he now replied with a dryness that was quite good-humoured: "Well, I suppose that *two* burst boilers in three months would be improbable, and it is a Bull to have a spring cleaning in September."

"You might perhaps work it through Susannah," suggested Laura dubiously, "but one never can get hold of her now, since she has taken to canteening six evenings of the week instead of three: Mrs. Henley told me that they practically never see her except on Sundays!"

"How restless people are!" murmured Rosamund, with a sigh of exhaustion at the mere thought of her fellow creatures' activity.

It was true that from the now dumb-grown "Grays" the tonic gaiety of its young daughter was mostly absent; though on the Sundays, which she still devoted to her family, she tried to make amends by a playful assiduity in buoying up the spirits of her two old house-mates, an assiduity in which perhaps only one of them detected the painful effort.

It was on one of her few holidays that they had been bereaved of her company by a flatteringly urgent note from Lady Cameron—a note of which had its recipient known it—three copies had been written and destroyed by its author ere the requisite height of *empressé* affection had been reached—inviting the girl to spend a nice long afternoon with her!

Susannah had accepted the overture with a trepidating eagerness which surprised Judith; and it was with puzzled anxiety that her old friend awaited her return, and the relation of how she had sped. It began at all events with a laugh which rang out in answer to her companion's eagerly expectant "Well?"

"Oh, it went off brilliantly, but, poor woman, I am

afraid that she must be feeling very much played out, after trying to like me, as hard as she has been doing for the last two hours and a half ! ”

“ And did she succeed ? ”

The question was half sarcastic, half nervous, and Miss Henley’s response was only a not very reassuring “ Hum ! ”

“ Did she tell you any news of Jack ? ”

Susannah shook her head. “ She does not think me worthy to hear his name mentioned ! We never went near the subject ! I did not dare ask her any questions about him, and once when she thought I had been looking at a new photograph of him, which I had not seen before, she moved it away out of sight, when she fancied that I did not observe her ! ”

“ How puerile ! ”

But Susannah did not echo the censure.

“ I don’t know, I am sure ! ” she said dejectedly, “ poor soul ! I quite see her point of view ! ”

“ And he has never written to you ? ” The sentence was less a query than an ejaculation.

The girl’s eyes had been wandering with an aimless trouble in them over the parched flower borders. Then they came back half reproachfully to the face of her old ally.

“ After Parthe’s communication was he likely to ? She did her work well ! ”

There was a note in the girl’s voice that froze the hackneyed protestation of her niece’s good intentions on the aunt’s lips. Susannah had however read it there, and said with one of her new unjoyous laughs.

“ Don’t ! We both know it so well ! ” A moment later she added reflectively. “ Poor Milady ! She had only one bright moment during my visit—the one when she made me take off my hat, and put it on again behind before. She said that it looked so much more coquettish.”

A look of relief at the change of key, in which however there was still a residuum of concern, crossed Judith’s face.

"It is monstrous!" she cried, "I could not imagine why you had made such a spectacle of yourself!"

"She could not help looking relieved when I told her that I must not wait to see Sir Edward," pursued Susannah, smiling rather ruefully, "but she ran after me when I was going away to say that 'we ought to see more of each other!'"

Both laughed, but with "le bout des dents!"

"She will be able to tell him when he comes back how conscientiously she has tried to endure you," Judith said; her eyes shining with indignant partizanship, as they rested on the downcast and rather paled face of her favourite; adding after a moment's thought: "Why don't you write to Jack yourself, explain to him what it was you really said and when?"

As she listened, a gleam of acquiescent pleasure dawned across the hearer's features; but it changed immediately to one of attempted mockery. "Give away poor Mr. Issacher, and the summer-house?" she cried derisively, "never!" She had taken off the headgear on which Milady had wrought her wicked will, tossed it down on the sofa beside her, and passed dishevelling hands through her bright fleece, as if its weight oppressed her.

Miss Crisp sat for a few moments, regarding her companion doubtfully, as if deliberating whether or not to put to her a question of whose reception she was uncertain. Susannah, with all her gay sweetness had never submitted to any probing of her own emotions. Was she likely now to tolerate it?

The answer was so unfavourable that her query when it at last appeared had dwindle down into a banal, "Does your head ache?"

Miss Henley's response had an unfamiliar tinge of sarcasm in it.

"Isn't it an accepted fact in this family," she asked, "that I never ache anywhere?"

CHAPTER LIX

PARTHENOPE'S visit to her relations in law did not come off, nor was she ever aware of its having been offered.

The Steeles' method of evasion was a simple one ; and which would, as they hoped, put a stop to future overtures of the same kind.

The father of the family wrote a kind, cool, sensible letter to his son, in which he pointed out to him the unseemliness, for a young couple so lately joined together, of entertaining a project of separation—even a temporary one. He expressed a grave doubt as to the acceptability to so fond a wife, of the suggestion ; and concluded with an observation that bombs were quite as likely to be dropped upon the Bungalow as on any given quarter of the Metropolis. The missive was read to and applauded by his family in their lack-lustre fashion ; was sent and apparently achieved its object since no more cries for help arrived at the Bungalow from the shipwrecked matrimonial mariner.

To Grays, meanwhile, there came almost daily communications from Parthenope ; in widely varying strains ; lamentations that the exigencies of patriotism should leave to her and her Willy so little space for enjoying the high bliss of each other's converse ; flat heroics over his lofty self-denial in imposing on himself such a sacrifice ; aspirations after the blessing of offspring ; whines over her own nerve-sufferings ; and finally pæans of exalted and satisfied passion ; and condescension of heart-felt pity for every female thing who was not the possessor of her own conjugal paragon. But during the last week or two this latter type had almost disappeared.

" I think that I shall run up and see how they are

getting on ! ” Miss Crisp observed one day to her coadjutor.

There was an unintentional misgiving in her voice, unintentional, since to express any doubt as to the success of the young *ménage*, would have been to run counter to the ten-year-long championship of a cause which it had cost her stout heart many a combat with herself to keep upholding. It was only in the innermost recess of her own being that she occasionally gave herself the relief of saying, “ If Parthe had not been my niece, how very much I should have disliked her.”

That her uneasiness had been detected was apparent from Mrs. Henley’s rejoinder. “ If I were you, I should leave them to fight it out.”

Miss Crisp reared her crest.

“ I have no reason for supposing that there is any question of fighting ! ” she answered, with dignity, “ but there was a lack of spirits in her last letter—probably the result of staying on in London so late—and it is always more satisfactory to see for oneself.”

It would have been more tactful on the part of Judith’s hearer to feign an acceptance of this explanation, as covering the whole ground, but she never could resist a bit at matrimony, nor did she see any reason for losing the present excellent opportunity of indulging in one.

“ They will shake down in time like other people, I suppose, when they have come to an end of the disagreeable discoveries incident to their state.”

Miss Crisp kept an irritated silence, searching her memory for an apposite poetic quotation, with which to rout her foe ; but none came at her call, and it was again Mrs. Henley who spoke.

“ You cannot go to-day ! Have you forgotten that we are engaged to see the Princess open Susannah’s new Hut ? Heaven grant that I may not be dragged up to be introduced to her Royal Highness.”

It was a sign of a still ruffled spirit which made the other

respond reassuringly: "I should not think that it was in the least likely!"

Several hours later a taxi bringing back the two ladies from Aldershot—Susannah's duties kept her to a much later hour—drew up at the door of Grays. Both were in better spirits than when they had set off. Mrs. Henley had successfully evaded Royal notice—an object in attaining which she was perfectly sincere—and on the other hand Susannah had been singled out for presentation at the Royal Lady's own request, had been complimented and asked questions, and shaken hands with, all under the very nose of Milady.

Poor Milady, who if Miss Henley's exultant parent had but known it, was commenting in bitterness of spirit on the triumphant fairness, to which a modest pleasure in her little social success had restored its lately lacking plenitude of bloom.

"Fool that I was," Lady Cameron was saying to her husband on her return from the opened Hut, "when she was here the other day I thought that her looking so washed out might mean that she was feeling a little remorse for her disgraceful conduct to Jack, and well she might!—but to-day she was as much like a full-blown peony as ever."

At the mention of Miss Henley's "disgraceful conduct" Sir Edward's eyebrows had moved upwards, but he confined his remonstrance to a gentle correction of Milady's simile.

"Not a *peony*, dear—a rose. In twenty years she may be a peony! It will be regrettable but she *may*. However she isn't now!"

His wife was not attending to him. Her fine eyes were lit with a gleam of resentful pleasure.

"I am so glad that I did not read her one word out of his letters! I thought that she looked as if she would like to ask whether we had heard from him? but I was determined not to gratify what was merely an impulse of inquisitiveness."

"I have never had much to say to 'Royals' as Jackson calls them," Mrs. Henley was saying to her companion, "but I remember at Lucknow once we were invited to meet a Prince Somebody at a Garden Party; and I asked a friend of mine what sort of a curtsy I ought to make, and she answered, 'Oh, the same as you do in the Creed—only deeper!' Ha! Ha! Good Heavens who is that at the door? not Parthenope?"

But it *was* Parthenope! There could be no doubt that the slender figure clad from head to heel in black, and the small ashen face, belonged to her who only two months ago, had set forth in convalescent radiance to make her *nid d'amour* in a London lodging, transfigured by love and roses into a "Cyprian Bower."

"Good Heavens!—what has happened!" cried both seniors at once: Judith adding, with an accent of acute apprehension, as a glance took in her niece's sable robe, "is Willy?—has anything happened to Willy?"

She scrambled hastily out of the taxi as she spoke; and Mrs. Henley bundled rapidly after her. Both precipitated themselves upon the young woman. The latter awaited their onslaught in an unnatural calm; and rather raised than lowered her voice as she replied:

"Willy is well! He has turned me adrift! If you will not take me in, I have no other refuge!"

It seemed as if in the extremity of her calamity thus announced it was a matter of indifference—nay, even of satisfaction to the speaker that both the chauffeur and the elderly parlourmaid should be made partakers of her woe.

But the elders felt differently; and the victim of conjugal brutality was hustled into the drawing-room (to the distinct disappointment of the unofficial audience left out of earshot)—before being subjected to any demand for further explanation. Then from two scared pairs of lips shot the simultaneous queries:

"Turned you adrift? Have you gone mad? or has he?"

CHAPTER LX

PARTHENOPE shook her head. "No," she answered, "he is not mad, unless, indeed," with a heart-wrung intonation, "it is madness to cast away such a love as mine."

She paused and Mrs. Henley gave a stamp of impatience. "For the love of Heaven speak out, and tell us what has happened."

Thus adjured Mrs. Willy Steele took up her parable.

"It was this morning," she said, "he was just setting off to catch his 'bus for Carlton House Terrace" (the ignoble vehicle named seemed out of scale with the tragedy of the situation). "I was giving him my parting kiss, when something came over me, and I cried out quite loud, 'Oh, do give up this paltry job! It is quite unworthy of you. Anyone could do the work they put you to, and it is wrecking both our lives—starving our love. Oh, for my sake—for your own, break your chain! Give it up!'" She paused, so much moved by the repetition of her own pathetic eloquence as to be almost unable to proceed.

"Well?"

"And then—I do not expect you to believe it, but it is God's truth—his answer was to push me violently—almost throw me from him—I had to seize hold of a screen that stood near to prevent myself falling, and hiss out in such a dreadful whisper, 'You are intolerable! Get out of my way,' and so rushed out of the room."

A silence followed. The trivial and prosaic objection that the irate Willy's abbreviated leg would prevent his *rushing* anywhere, even under the stress of such an impulse as that recorded, traversing the minds of both hearers. It was the matron who first found words, and they were dry ones.

"I suppose that it was not the first time that you had mentioned the subject. It never answers to go on nagging a man." She spoke as out of a fulness of experience from that connubial past, to which she never more directly alluded.

"I don't know what you call 'nagging,'" replied the accused, resentfully drawing up her thin little throat, "if to adjure him in the tenderest phrases I could find, to be true to his Higher Self, to his love and to his just sense of his own merits, be to nag him, I certainly have never ceased doing so since I married him."

Mrs. Henley gave one of her characteristic grunts, which on this occasion implied complete belief in the assertion made.

"And you came away at once? Without seeing him again?" asked Miss Crisp in accents of dismayed compassion.

Once again the sufferer wreathed her neck. "Could I stay under his roof, when he had told me to get out of his way?" she asked, with broken-hearted dignity. "No, I promised to obey him, and I have always done so. I have done so to-day."

Once again an aghast silence settled on the party, the two elders asking themselves whether they were on their heads or their heels, and whether the affecting little black-clad figure before them was indeed that tiresome hysteric they had always known? or the embodiment of high and deeply wronged conjugal tenderness which she looked?

The oppressive stillness was broken by an abrupt change in the visitor's mood. With a sudden blizzard of tears and sighs, she flung herself upon her aunt's neck.

"And so," she sobbed, "I have taken refuge with the one heart that I knew would welcome me!"

A few hours later, Susannah and Judith were looking frankly at each other in Susannah's bedroom.

"I have got her off to sleep at last," Miss Crisp was saying in a careworn voice, "and of course he will come

and fetch her back to-morrow, and there will be a reconciliation."

"Of course there will," replied the girl, "we all know that 'Partings end in Lovers' Meetings.'" There was a determined effort to give a lift to her old friend's drooping spirits in speech and look, but there was no disguising the fact how sorely the speaker's own cheerfulness needed a hoist. She was sitting on the floor, her fair arms, from which the loose sleeves of a dressing-gown fell away, embracing her knees, and her lovely face as washed-out in colour as even *Milady* could have wished.

Miss Crisp looked at her discontentedly. "I shall have to tuck you too up," she said, but with hesitation, since *Susannah's* rebutting of any accusation of physical weakness had ever been only less indignant in its energy than her mother's. "You look quite played out."

But at that her junior vaulted to her feet. "Say that again and I shall take you by the shoulders and turn you out of my room!"

"Will you?" replied the recipient of this threat. "If you do I shall be of the same opinion on the other side of the door. *Susannah!*" going up to the girl, and laying a prisoning hand on each arm, so as to bring herself closely face to face with the object of her scrutiny, "can you look me in the eyes and tell me that you are not worrying yourself about something?"

For a moment a flash of rebellion against this most illegal attempt to storm her confidence darted into Miss *Henley's* eyes, then it vanished, and she stood passive, and said in a dull voice, "Of course I am worrying badly about Jack. I did not like him as much as he expected me, but he was the nicest thing in my life, and now he has gone out of it."

The elder woman slowly loosed her hold of the white limbs she had gripped. She had known that she was not—that no old woman could be—the "nicest thing" in a young woman's life, but it gave her a senseless pang to be told so. Perhaps *Susannah* who never willingly hurt

anyone's feelings, partly divined this, for she took hold of one of the old hands that had just loosed her, and said very kindly, "Thank Heaven, I have at all events you left, you dear old thing! But," with a somewhat uphill jocosity, "as there is not much chance of your being sent to the trenches, I am not anxious about you."

The following morning brought no news of the deserted husband, nor did the evening train bring him in person to reclaim his fugitive consort. A cold misgiving that his intention was, by showing a masterly inactivity, to acquiesce in her absence, began to invade the minds of the inhabitants of Grays, and it was with a very acute relief that in the late afternoon of the second day Judith saw from her chair beside the just kindled drawing-room fire, that the already fast shortening September day rendered pleasant, the culprit descending from a taxi at the hall door, and before she had made up her mind how to receive him he was in the room. To her eyes his limp appeared more emphasised, and his hair more staringly rough, than ever before. He looked miserable enough, but not contrite.

"This is a nice buisness," she said, rising, without putting out her hand, a hand from which, however, she felt that the intended thunderbolts were already inclined weakly to drop.

He cast a rapid glance around. "Can I speak to you alone? Is—*is* she likely to be within hearing?"

"She is lying down on her bed," returned Miss Crisp, with an accent of almost sincere reproach. "I persuaded her to try and get a little sleep (she has had two practically sleepless nights), and forget her sorrows for a little while!"

A look of undisguised relief crossed the young man's features, on which, however, no trace of remorse was even yet to be detected. "That is all right," he responded, drawing a long breath. "I was afraid that there might be a difficulty about seeing you alone, and I have come on purpose to tell you that *I cannot stand her any longer!*"

CHAPTER LXI

WHEN a material bomb falls it makes an enormous rift in the area affected, but a metaphorical shell may be launched without any perceptible effect upon its surroundings. The chairs in the drawing-room at Grays continued to stand quietly in their allotted places, and the Persian rugs spread themselves with no disturbance of warp or woof, after Willy Steele had hurled his projectile. Its one audible effect was to force a gasping "Oh!" from the mouth of Miss Crisp, and then there was a silence that might be felt. After it had lasted several seconds it became more than the criminal could bear, and he rushed into speech again, not to explain away or modify, but rather to justify, his last tremendous utterance. "She makes a Hell of my life," he said, with low-voiced intensity of violence, "and, for the matter of that, of her own too! And it cannot and *shall not* go on any longer." His always sallow face had taken on a greenish cast. He looked deadly ill; but feeble and unstrung as was his body, there was no doubt about the vigour and resolution of his spirit.

"How does she make a Hell of your life?" enquired his companion indistinctly. She felt compelled to repeat his phrase, since neither brain nor tongue would supply her with any of her own.

The young man—to-day his twenty-three years looked almost doubled—paused a minute as if to gather all his forces for a crushing blow. "You know," he said in an ominously restrained voice, "what my enforced idleness was to me. What an unutterable relief it was to me to get the chance of doing even such poor work as my wretchedly handicapped condition would allow. You know that the offer of my present job came to me as rescue

from absolute despair. Well, she never leaves me a moment's peace day or night ; she never stops nagging at me to chuck it—to give the whole thing up. She is eternally telling me that anyone could do my work—that it is an insult to my intelligence to put me to anything so purely mechanical." He paused, suffocated. Nature had not given him the gift of mimicry, and his attempt to imitate Parthenope's little pipe was as unsuccessful as it well could be.

His auditor looked at him with a traitorous sense of fellow feeling. "It is trying," she answered, with an involuntary, and what she felt to be a disloyal lapse into sympathy, "but, as I have often told you, she has a perhaps excessive admiration for your abilities. I am afraid that you must pay the penalty of her extravagant fondness for you."

The young man returned his companion's gaze with one in which desperation was more conspicuous than gratitude. "I have paid it for more than two whole months," he answered, with an accent of immovable determination, "if I had to pay it for two more, or even two days, it would land me in a madhouse. *Day and night ! Day and night !*"

Once again Judith was conscious of that disgraceful inclination to side with the sallow young criminal before her. She had had Parthenope for ten years, and he for only two months ! But then she had had her nights to herself. Wretched, wretched young man !

After a few moments she pulled herself partially together.

"And this," she sighed, reproachfully shaking her head, "is the end after only two months of what began so brightly. No one could have looked happier than you did at your wedding. Everyone remarked it."

He gave a start of surprise and as it were repudiation. "Of course I was happy. Hadn't I just heard that I had got a job ? Did you imagine that it had anything to say to my *marriage* ?" Such a weight of scorn was laid on

the last word, as enabled the hearer to recover her balance and return to her proper attitude of mind.

"And may I ask," she enquired, with freezing emphasis, "what course you propose to pursue under these circumstances?"

At that he ran both hands wildly through his hair, regarding her with a desperate resourcelessness, streaked with upbraiding. "What course?" he repeated blankly. "None, none! My mind has been in too chaotic a state to be able to frame any coherent plan. I thought—I hoped—that possibly you—you might find—might suggest—some way out."

She shook her head decisively. The flicker of appeal died out of his stricken face.

"Then all I can say is that if I had to go on living with her, I should become a raving lunatic. You don't know what she is," he corrected himself, "what she can be."

In a dismal flash Miss Crisp's memory lit up the last decade of her life, and gave an acrid dryness to her retort. "Don't I? That is odd, since she has lived with me for ten years!"

"But not *night and day*!" he flamed out vehemently, "*Not night and day*!"

A sense of humour is at once a blessing and curse. Do what she would a most wry inclination to laugh beset Judith at the hearing of this deplorably intimate plaint. She could do nothing better than repeat its utterance with parrot-like stupidity, "*Not night and day*!"

The best of villas are flimsily built, and at this point a sound as of someone walking overhead made itself heard.

Steele gave a start. "Can she hear us?" he enquired in a frightened whisper. "Is she likely to come down?"

Once again Miss Crisp's head made a sign of negation. "That is not her room," she answered. "Poor soul! She has gone back, at her own request, to the little room that she occupied in her girlhood."

If Parthenope's advocate had hoped by this touching hint of her niece's return to the habits of her virginity, to

shake the resolution of her lord, she soon found that she had reckoned without her host.

"No object would be gained by my seeing her," he replied, clenching his hands as if to emphasise the determination of his words. "It would only bring on an attack of hysterics. For the last month she has been almost continuously hysterical. I have borne it as long as I could, but there is a limit beyond which human nature cannot endure, and I have reached it." His sunken eyes, which looked as if sleep had long been a stranger to them, met hers with resolute defiance, as if warning her that opposition to a purpose so immovable would be useless. But there was no opposition in her. She stood dumb, her arms hanging down by her sides, her head a little bent, a tide of sympathy in the wrong place, with a sense of defeat and impotency in face of so irremediable a situation washing over her heart.

Her appearance must indeed have been forlorn, for a consciousness of it seemed to pierce the excited absorption of the young man. "You may not believe it," he said, with an accent of remorse, "but I am really sorry for you. You have always tried to do your best for—us, and I expect that in your day you have had a good deal to put up with from her! Of course I wish—I intend—I shall at once take steps to that effect—to make over my whole income to her, except what will just keep body and soul together for me. It is only fair that I should. She will be quite comfortably provided for. She may go where she likes and live wherever she pleases, but one thing is certain," his hitherto feverishly hurrying speech grew slow, each word taking on an adamant hardness of certainty, "as long as I have breath in my body, I will never go through the Hell of living with her again!"

CHAPTER LXII

"I AM very, *very* tired of being congratulated upon my coldness," Susannah said in a weary voice, as she stepped churchwards one Sunday morning in early October by Judith's side. "Poor thing! One ought not to grudge her any relief she can find in telling me how lucky I am to have been born such an iceberg, but it *does* pall after a time! And she always ends by adding that all the same she would not change with me, and that it is better to have once known the best and highest, even though by no fault of your own, you have lost it."

"Icebergs melt in spring," commented her companion, with a triteness that had something tentative in it.

The girl gave a laugh that was like a skeleton of one of her former happy bursts of merriment. "But this is October!" After a moment or two she added, as if to her too there had come a need for the relief of expansion. "Oh, dear! I wonder if they have heard from him since the Germans regained that horrible Hohenzollern Redoubt! He must have been there!" There was a cry of only half-suppressed heart-pain audible in the words which gave the idea of having escaped without their owner's leave. However, as the end of the sentence brought them to the church door, there was no opportunity, even if the elder woman had found the necessary courage, to probe further a wound so involuntarily laid open.

Inside the door the two women came up with Laura Steele who, with something of a *figure de circonstance*, just whispered, "Oh! Aren't you sorry for them?" as she passed and disappeared into a row of chairs before any explanation could be asked or given.

Sorry for whom and why? The question kept dinning

itself in Judith's brain all through the unheard Liturgy and the sermon, happily equally unheard, since the pulpit was occupied by a Pacifist Guinea Pig who preached the urgent desirability of Peace at any price, and the supreme duty of taking to our bosoms the whole Teuton race, to a restive congregation of retired warriors and their families. Miss Crisp would have been as restive as any, had she heard the doctrines enunciated, but her ears were stopped by that preoccupying apprehension which had also blanched the face of her young companion. At the latter she now and then stole a furtive glance or two. Steadily as Susannah's brilliant bloom had been lessening of late, the excessive pallor that now clad the profile rigidly bent over its Prayer Book beside her, gave the elder woman the sensation that she was looking at a stranger. There was no doubt that the same conclusion as to the identity of the "them" alluded to in Laura Steele's whisper, had been reached by both hearers.

When released by the Benediction they were the first members of the congregation to find themselves outside the church, and without any spoken agreement paused in painful suspense a few yards from the door, where they could not possibly miss her, for the egress of the person waited for, but, as discovered after several minutes of eager watching the issuing stream of humanity, waited for in vain. Laura Steele was remaining for the second Service. As soon as this fact became evident both women turned away, and for a while sped silently on their homeward road, both feeling the impossibility of exchanging the usual banal nothings with their co-worshippers. The pace was so fast that after a while Judith's breath began to come short, and she said pantingly, "We have distanced everybody. We might walk more slowly now, if you did not mind."

The old Susannah would have been full of sweet apologies for her own want of consideration at this appeal. The new one only answered in an odd hard voice, "Don't let me hurry you, but I *must* get home. I shall go over on my

bicycle. I had rather know the worst." There was no relaxation of her speed as she spoke.

"After all, we have very little to go upon," Judith said, valiantly trying to keep pace with the younger and longer legs ahead of her, "we have no real reason for concluding that she meant them. They are not intimate with the Steeles, and it is very unlikely that they would tell them what they have not told us."

Susannah's sole answer was to say with hard low brevity, "Anyhow I *must* know," and the rest of the return was accomplished in silence.

"Where on earth is she off to now?" asked Parthenope, catching sight of the bicycle and its rider as they vanished through the gate in a very short space of time, after the two women had reached the house. "That everlasting canteen, I suppose?"

The little black-clad figure had only just stolen sadly downstairs, and there was a sound of plaint in the small, half-extinguished voice.

"No," replied Miss Crisp, with that resolved gentleness in her tone which it was her now constant effort to employ towards her afflicted niece, "we have reason to fear that something—we don't know what—has happened to Jack Cameron, and it made Susannah so anxious that she could not rest till she had ascertained what."

An incredulous smile broke up for a moment the mournful lines of Mrs. Willy Steele's face. "Susannah anxious about *any* man born of woman! Tell me something more likely than that."

"People have different ways of showing their feelings," retorted the other, with so much warmth that she felt obliged to walk away quickly at once for fear of becoming brutal towards the defenceless victim of man's cruelty before her.

Meanwhile Miss Henley was covering with dangerous celerity the miles that intervened between Grays and the house of the Camerons. Down the breakneck hills and along the pine-bordered roads she flashed, while Tommies

in twos and threes and Sunday-hatted girls appropriating khaki figures, turned their heads to follow with their eyes the flying vision. She saw none of them, any more than she had heard a word of the sermon. All her senses seemed forced into the service of the one mastering apprehension, the one compelling need to have her question answered, her doubt solved.

Were the "they" of Laura Steele's whisper indeed the family towards which she was speeding, or some other of the numberless bereft or threatened ones to whom the girl's enigmatic words might apply? Hours seemed to her to have elapsed—in point of fact a bare half-hour had ticked itself out—before she found herself ringing the hall door bell at her goal. Her hand shook as she did it, and a mis-giving which had been gathering strength on the way, assailed her that if the implied bad news were true, and indeed referred to the Camerons, she would certainly not be admitted.

A horrid pang shot through her as she made the reflection that if anything had "*happened to Jack*" (ominous euphemism!) she herself would be the last person whom Milady would desire to see.

Her fear of exclusion was, however, removed by her immediate and unhesitating admission. A flood of relief poured over her, as the instant affirmative given to her faltering enquiry as to whether Lady Cameron would see her, fell on her ear. It was coupled with a hot flush of conviction that she had made a fool of herself, and would have a difficulty in finding a colourable pretext for her appearance. She had made a fool of herself! But there was evidently no ill news of Jack.

This conviction, in which the sense of relief so immeasurably outweighed the *mauvaise honte*, lasted only as long as did the hall and passage. The first glimpse through the opening drawing-room door of Milady's figure walking feverishly and fast, to and fro, to and fro, at once dispelled it. Something *had* happened to Jack! And "they" were Jack's parents!

CHAPTER LXIII

At the sounds of the opening door and the announced name Lady Cameron stopped her uneasy march, and faced her visitor with a look that plainly asked why she had come, and a hand that went out unready.

It was a pallid and shaking voiced Susannah who took the reluctant fingers in hers, and said with extreme diffidence, "I was afraid that you wouldn't see me."

"Edward advises me to receive everyone as usual," replied the other tonelessly.

The visitor's hands gripped each other, when the right one had dropped out of the lukewarm clasp that had been accorded it. "You have had bad news?" she asked almost under her breath, "I felt it. I knew that you wouldn't want me, but I had to come."

In the great moments of any life the thin veneer of civilisation rubs off, and Milady made no attempt to controvert the assertion that Miss Henley's presence was undesired by her.

"Jack has been wounded," she answered, with a piteous attempt at matter-of-courseness, and carrying it off lightly. "As Edward justly says, it is the common lot."

For a moment or two, there was a pause. (If Jack's mother was so Spartan how dared she be less so? was the girl's half-formulated thought.) But she could trust her voice only to the utterance of one word "*Badly?*"

"We don't know." Across the numb misery of the elder woman's mind flashed a vindictive desire to impart nothing more—after all there was so little to tell!—to punish the woman who had made her boy suffer so much, by basking her curiosity—no doubt it was only curiosity, and keeping her as long as possible on the tenterhooks of

suspense even with regard to the little it was in her own power to tell. She would answer any questions that were put to her—but why should she volunteer anything more ?

At first it seemed as if no more enquiries were to be put to her. Susannah stood before her, with parted lips trembling. Those lips whose fresh redness had always made her feel angry. No one could accuse them of being too red to-day, nor of lending themselves to the criticism which others besides Milady herself had formerly brought against them, that it was a misfortune to have such a “sealing-wax” mouth, since it was almost impossible to believe that it did not owe some at least of its vividness to paint.

At last a few faint syllables joined themselves into words. “Was it from the War Office ?”

“Yes.”

Milady was keeping to her resolution though the idea did cross her mind that if it were mere curiosity which dictated her companion’s gasping utterances, she had never seen inquisitiveness clad in such a pallor.

As Susannah faced her, motionless, wide-eyed and unable apparently to make any further attempts to conquer her own dry brevity, a pang of remorse added its prick to the dull ache of the mother’s heart. How angry Jack would be with her, if he knew what pains she was taking to wring a pang out of his idol’s cold heart ! Then with a rush came the dreadful thought, “He will never know ! I may be as unkind to her as I like without hurting him. Why shouldn’t I, if it gives me the smallest relief from this rending agony ?”

Probably in another moment the pendulum would have swung back towards bitter self-reproach, and an attempt at reparation, but before the unhappy woman’s effort at self-conquest could take shape in words, Susannah spoke again, and her whole soul seemed passing through her white lips in a sigh of entreaty.

“Oh ! won’t you tell me what they said ?”

For all answer Milady held out the official wire, which she had evidently scarcely let out of her grasp since first it was put into it, with all the tender preparations possible, by her husband. There was a blur across the usually pellucidly clear eyes that greedily read it, which made them slow in taking in the arid brevity of the formal announcement of the War Office's regret in conveying the information that Captain J. Cameron of the —th Regiment had been wounded in action between October 4th and 6th. Not a syllable more. No hint as to the gravity or comparative slightness of the hurt, of the place where it had been suffered or the hospital to which the wounded man had been conveyed. Susannah's first conscious sensation after the perusal of the telegram was that Milady was taking it back out of her hand, as if she could not bear to let it remain out of her own possession.

"And that is all?"

The sight of the great blue eyes—saucer-eyes she had always called them—staring in utter aghastness at her out of a face as white as a tablecloth, bred a sort of false fortitude in the mother.

"Yes," she answered distinctly, "that is all we could expect. When the Stavely's son was killed they did not hear of it for ten days." She pronounced the dreadful word without perceptible blenching.

In dazed wonder at the other's valorous self-command Susannah tried to imitate it.

"Is there nothing that you can do?" she asked, with a laborious attempt to be steady and intelligible in speech.

"Edward wired at once to his Colonel, but he has had no answer. We shall probably hear shortly if he is dead too."

A little cry broke from the hearer's pale mouth. "Too! Oh, why do you say *too*?"

A sort of slight convulsion crossed Milady's blanched face, but her stupefying composure still held. "It was a slip of the tongue," she replied. At that she resumed her uneasy march up and down, to and fro, from wall to wall.

Susannah remained rooted to the spot where she had first stopped on entering the room, hands painfully bruising each other in the rigour of their interlocked clasp, and knees feeling as if they were going to give beneath her.

By and by, Lady Cameron suddenly paused in front of her. "I suppose," she said, "that I have forgotten my manners—that I ought to have thanked you for showing us so much sympathy. If I had not known to the contrary I should have thought from your look and manner that you had a personal stake in this—this" (she fumbled for an instant for a word), "anxiety of ours."

"And haven't I? Won't you let me have?" It was such an unmistakable cry from the heart, so humble, so entreating that a species of shaken surprise relaxed the unnatural stiffening of the mother's features. Then they hardened again.

"You have never hitherto given either him or me reason to think so." The old grudge was awake again. It had slept for a mere second. This shaking white creature was the same insolent upstart who had dared to undervalue and reject him for whom she now feigned so exaggerated a concern! Even if it was not feigning—and it certainly did not look like it!—how richly she deserved to suffer! Did anyone ever merit it more?

Under the lash of words and look Susannah had first winced away as if actually struck, and then, sunk on her knees on the floor, holding up her hands as if warding off a blow, and crying, "Don't! Don't! If you knew how I have reproached myself! And yet it wasn't all my fault. If I had had the chance of saying good-bye to him——" A dry sob stopped her. Above her she was conscious of Jack's mother towering like an avenging angel, but she could not be conscious of the welter of miserable triumph and triumphant misery that was surging in that avenging angel's heart.

Her boy had conquered. This was a vanquished foe that was crouching at her feet. To a vanquished foe one ought to be generous, and yet—Jack would probably never

know of his victory, and it had lain with this woman to send him with a light heart, instead of—oh ! such a heavy one, to his death.

After a pause she brought herself to say in a quasi-compassionate key, " It is a pity that you did not realise what your feelings were a little earlier. I am afraid that you must be feeling rather wretched."

Susannah's answer was to repeat the last words with a passion of assent, "*Wretched !*" she said. " Yes, my worst enemy, if I have one, could not wish me to be more so."

CHAPTER LXIV

"THERE can be no question as to her having made a good thing out of the transaction," Laura Steele was saying with an ominous shake of the head. "You know how obstinate he can be, and he is absolutely determined not to keep a farthing more than £200 a year for himself. He says that it will be ample for all his needs—that he has no expensive tastes, and it is the least that he can do in reparation of the sufferings he has caused her."

The speaker had been deputed to seek out her brother Willy, in the inexpensive London fastness to which he had retired from the apartments that had been the scene of his married life, with a view to bringing him to reason on the subject of his conjugal relations. From this errand she had just returned, fagged and unsuccessful.

Mrs. Steele's head declined towards her left shoulder, as it always did in moments of perplexity or distress. "You could not persuade him to make one more attempt to put up with her? He might get used to her in time. One gets used to everything."

The possibility was so *very* faintly enunciated that it was no wonder it carried conviction to none of her hearers.

"He was quite, quite firm," replied the crestfallen emissary, "he told me that no power in heaven above or the earth beneath or the waters under the earth should ever induce him to live with her again. He literally shuddered at the bare idea."

Mr. Steele took the inevitable cigarette out of his mouth and smiled slightly. He was almost as much annoyed at the catastrophe under discussion as the rest of his family, but even his own misfortunes he never could help seeing in the dry light of cynicism. "It is a curious speculation

what methods a young woman could take to make herself so extremely offensive in so very short a time."

His youngest daughter responded in a key as cynical as his own. "My only wonder is that he held out as long as he did."

Mrs. Steele's chin became imbedded in her breast. "Two hundred a year!" she sighed. "Starvation!"

Her eldest daughter, chillily curled up in a corner by the fire, echoed her plaint. "It would not find one in food and firing."

The material aspects of life were the only ones that ever presented themselves as worthy of contemplation to Rosamund's mind.

"It is such a change of tune," Laura said indignantly. "The day that she came here and cried over us all, she was quite on her high horse. Would not hear of accepting a farthing from him."

The father of the family gave a slight laugh. "That was an attitude of mind that under the circumstances was scarcely likely to last."

His wife lifted her drooped head, and looked with melancholy approbation at her lord. "She now takes the line of saying that it is her duty to obey him implicitly, whatever he commands her, but as to the money she will hold it only as a steward, and render him a faithful account of it, whenever he comes back to her. This is what Miss Crisp told me yesterday. I will do her the justice to say that she looked rather ashamed while she was speaking."

Her husband regarded her with affectionate irony. "And you? What scathing retort did you make?"

Once again the matron's handsome head bent sideways. "I did not say anything," she replied in the smallest of all her small voices. "What was there to say?" . . .

"*Whenever he came back to her.*" It was the conviction of the certainty of his ultimate return which, after the first few days of absolute collapse, enabled Mrs. Willy Steele to bear the humiliating agony of her desertion so beautifully. "It is a fiery trial," she said, throwing her little stick-like

arms round her Aunt's neck, "but I shall win through, and you upon whose love I have always been able to rest as on a granite rock will not fail me in this terrible pass."

"Of course I won't," replied Miss Crisp really somewhat touched, but wriggling a little under the prolonged encirclement she was undergoing, and which was all the more unwelcome as Mrs. Henley—always contemptuous of embraces apropos of nothing—was just entering the room. But Parthenope, in the dignity of her grief, was not to be put out of countenance by such a trifle. Still keeping one arm round her kinswoman's neck, she held out the other hand to the new-comer.

"You won't turn me out, will you?" she asked, while the water stood in her sunken eyes. "I am sure that you have too good a heart to break such a 'bruised reed.' You will let me stay—till—till—he comes to take me away."

With whatever heart sinkings at the eminently problematical date of the suggested *dénouement*, Mrs. Henley acquiesced, whether goaded into living up to the tender-heartedness with which she was credited, or because her power of resistance was weakened by the general disagreeableness of things all round.

So Parthenope remained, and there might as well never have been any pretty and expensive wedding nor any joyful send-off to a bride who had been returned upon her friends' hands, almost before the last grains of rice had been shaken out of the brim of her going-away hat. She moved about the house clad in the modified weeds of a young war widow, a very touching little figure, people said.

As a girl she had not been popular, but as a mourner she had a decided success. As was generally observed, it was so nice of her to be quite willing to talk about her grief, and to do it so simply and unresentfully, always ending up her narratives of past sufferings and unmerited desertion, by the pathetically confident assertion of the certainty of the ultimate return of her truant to the arms that would never cease to be outstretched to receive him. "He must be a proper brute," was the comment upon the offender.

of those who had no personal acquaintance with him, while those who had held with him the slightest intercourse, which was all that his shy and rather savage nature rendered possible, now remembered that they had always thought he had a bad countenance and never looked you straight in the face. People who *ask* for sympathy almost always get it, but to the *buttoned-up* natures, to whom it would be quite as welcome and precious, but who are incapable of *demanding* it, it is almost always denied.

"I have quite got back into my old niche," Parthenope affectingly observed one evening to her two elders. She had of late taken to plying them with small attentions which they had rather have been without, and at the present moment was turning the heel of a khaki sock, extracted against that lady's will from Mrs. Henley's work basket.

Neither of the seniors answered, and the younger woman continued without apparently feeling anything discouraging in their silence, "In fact I think and hope that I am more useful than I ever was able to be before, when Susannah filled up the whole horizon. Now that she is so seldom at home, and so sadly changed when she is, I am able to come in."

CHAPTER LXV

It was half-past ten o'clock p.m. and Susannah had just returned from her Canteen. Miss Crisp was awaiting her in the drawing-room, beside an all but dead wood fire, and lit by only one small electric lamp, both economic tributes to the war.

Mrs. Henley and Parthenope had gone to bed. The girl almost ran in, and her eyes, blinking a little at the change from the soft darkness outside to the shining—however subdued—within, put the question which the occupant of the silent room had expected from her lips.

Judith shook her head. "No news! Nothing!"

The hearer took it without comment, and in comprehending sympathy with her inability to voice any further inquiries, Miss Crisp went on, "I was there rather late—about seven. They had heard absolutely nothing. Of course they had been wiring and asking everywhere—War Office, Red Cross—but nothing! Both, of course, assured them that they would let them know as soon as they had any information."

"Did you—did you——" (Susannah could speak at last), "did you see *her*?"

Again the elder woman shook her head. "I did not ask to see anybody, but he—Sir Edward heard my voice, I suppose, and came to the door."

"Yes?" The monosyllable was very faint, but the interrogation in it was eager. "He sent his love to you, poor man, and bade you keep up your spirits, and tell you that as for him he was not in the least downhearted, and that you were not to be either. He—he quite smiled when he said it." At the recollection of that valiant attempt at mirth Judith's voice broke a little.

The lips of the recipient of that brave message twitched convulsively. She stood stockstill on the same spot where she had paused on her hurried entrance. Stockstill, dressed in her uniform and pale as "linen," to translate the graphic French phrase. It had always seemed that the main characteristic of Miss Henley's beauty had been brilliancy, a colouring Venetian in its rich glory. A few cavillers had even been heard to affirm that without her startling bloom, she would have been much like other people. Yet now the dazzling colour was gone—gone as completely as if it had been bleached away. Yet she stood there fairer than ever. Undistracted by the pinks and reds that were wont to storm the gazer's eye it could verify the delicate chiselling of the features and the soul that had been born of pain, and come, giving new meaning, into the careless, joyous Undine face. Even across Miss Crisp's troubled spirit the thought flashed with a sort of pleasure, how radically, indefeasibly handsome her favourite was. ("I never had any cause to be vain for myself," was the form that the hazy floating self-reproach took in her mind, "but I certainly am criminally vain for Susannah. I must be, to be troubling my head about her appearance at even such a moment as this.")

Her own beauty was far enough from Susannah's thoughts as she stood in dry-eyed, dumb wretchedness, listening without comment to the message sent her.

"Sir Edward is always good as a Pick-me-up," Judith said, with a determined attempt to lift the dialogue—if indeed it could be called so—to a cheerfuller plane, "and in this case I personally quite agree with him. *I feel in my bones* that it is going to come all right."

The girl lifted the woeful blue of her eyes to her old comrade's face, but no gleam of comfort dawned in them. "I wish that you could get it into *my bones* too." The dejection with which the words were spoken was so indistinguishably like despair, that the hearer's dismay led her to try to put a tone of scolding into her rejoinder.

"I don't recognise you," she said. "*You, so sanguine,*

who always looked at the bright side. *You*—our tonic, our optimist ! ”

“ *Was I an optimist ?* ” there was a thread of astonishment running through her voice. “ I suppose that it was because I did not care.”

After a few moments of brooding silence she added with an accent of the bitterest self-reproach, “ One of the last times that I saw him I was kind enough to tell him that I should be very glad to love him *if I could*. *If I could !* As if it were so difficult ! ” She raised both hands to her face, covering her eyes, as if to shut out an intolerably painful sight.

“ When he comes back you shall tell him that it is not so difficult after all. You shall tell him so when he is convalescent—able to bear hearing good news. For my part I am confident that he will come back. I promise you that he shall. I give you my word of honour that he will.” Conscious that she was talking egregious nonsense, but snatching at any phrase that might thaw back into life the marble image before her, Miss Crisp came close up to the girl, and excitedly pulled away the veiling hands from her face. “ Are you asleep ? Don’t you hear what I say ? Don’t you believe me ? ”

But Susannah kept an unresisting, stony silence. . . .

“ Would you mind,” Miss Crisp said next morning, addressing her niece, as she was floating out into the autumnal garden, with a handful of bass matting in her hand—she had of late, much to Mrs. Henley’s consternation, taken to a sort of fancy gardening, in pursuance of her touching plan of being “ helpful ”—“ would you mind not complimenting Susannah again on her want of feeling ? It hurts her a good deal, and I am sure that you don’t want to hurt her.”

Parthenope’s tear-washed eyes opened to their fullest extent in pained astonishment, and her insignificant voice was burdened with a weight of reproach that it seemed hardly able to carry, as she repeated, “ *Hurt her ? Hurt Sue ?* Is it likely ? Would I hurt a fly ? No ! ” with an

expressive headshake. "I know too well what it feels like."

"Just so. That is all right," replied Judith hurriedly, and with a gesture that gave the idea of putting up an umbrella to protect herself against the shower bath of laments and resignations which she knew was likely to follow upon this reference. "I only thought I would give you a hint."

"Thank you very much," replied her niece unexpectedly, while the inspired look with which her family had lately grown so familiar, chased the reproach from her little wilted face. "You mean that her soul has come into her at last. I knew that it would! I am so glad! I must tell her how glad I am!"

"For God's sake do nothing of the kind! Wait till there is something to be glad about."

It was perhaps as well at this point that Mrs. Henley burst into the room, half laughing, yet angry. "In the midst of life we are in death!" she cried. "I have just had a narrow escape! Jackson all but knocked me over, butting into me backwards with the mowing machine!"

CHAPTER LXVI

“WAIT till there is something to be glad about.”

In that October month, while the cherry trees at Grays were flushing rosily against a background of golden poplars, there was not much for any British heart to be glad about. The tragedy of Loos, the death cries of Serbia, the diplomatic débâcle, the Dardanelles fiasco, zeppelin raids—calamity—under what Protean shapes it presented itself!

And at how many doors did the Angel of Death present himself under the prosaic form of a telegraph boy?

“Darkest before dawn,” Mrs. Henley said sturdily one morning, when even the arid official *communiqués* gave glimpses of a situation yet blacker than usual. She threw down the paper as she spoke and hastened out of the room to avoid hearing Parthenope’s eager little whine to the effect of how much blacker things might and probably would soon be.

The smell of the good brown earth, just beginning to be turned in preparation for the spring planting, and the reducing to a jelly of Jackson and his threnody over the disappearance from the markets of lump sugar, did more to soothe her chafed spirit than could any other treatment, and she was able to turn a face of placid expectancy towards her coadjutor, whom she saw approaching along the grand walk.

Miss Crisp’s countenance was more overcast than her friends’, though their attitude of mind towards public affairs was identical, and the *darkest before dawn* formula, common to both. Not to ensure their eternal salvation would either of them have admitted to their little world, to each other, or to themselves, that there could ever, under any circumstances, be aught critical in the situation

of that beloved Empire, on which the sun never set. It was a private care that had added some new horizontal lines to those that Time had drawn on Judith's forehead. "Yes," she said, "I am just off. I am afraid that it is not much use. If they had heard anything they would have wired to us. But Susannah when she comes back to-night will like to know that I have been." . . .

"Won't you go yourself?" was the question that had been put an hour or two earlier to the girl by the old friend who, without any such intention on the part of either, had slipped into the office of semi-confidante to the otherwise resolutely *boutonnée* Susannah. "To-morrow, I mean. You know that it is Sunday. I believe that Milady would see you."

The other shook her head, the drooped head that was carried so differently from its former buoyant grace.

"I am sure that she would, because she would think it her duty to him: but the sight of me always hurts her, and I am sure that I don't wonder. God knows that she has pain enough without my giving her more!"

"I should think that she might forgive you *now*!" returned the elder, ruefully taking in the new ravages that, as it seemed to her even in the last twenty-four hours, had been wrought in the metamorphosed loveliness before her. With a pang she asked herself how long under such a strain as this would it remain loveliness? The thought of Barbara Allen darted grotesquely into her mind, as she waved farewell to the departing girl.

The Hospital all morning, the Y.M.C.A. Canteen all afternoon and evening. Certainly Susannah did not nourish her grief in idleness or solitude. She had even docked half of her Sunday rest, which was now limited only to the forenoon. The Canteen was specially busy on Sunday afternoons.

The messenger took her way heavily along the road which during the past three weeks had grown so familiar to her. She was too old to bicycle and taxis were expensive, but this was felt to be no occasion for small economies.

She always got out some little distance from the house, so as to make her presence as inconspicuous as possible, and having received from a servant the hitherto invariable formula of no further news having been received, unobtrusively withdrew. A suggestion had been made to Parthenope to take her turn in the daily mission of enquiry, but she had shaken her head gently but resolutely, and there was a distinct streak of reproach apparent in the tone of her voice as she answered, "It is impossible—out of the question that I should go anywhere further off than the Bungalow. He might come while I was out—come to fetch me back. *Whenever* he comes—'at evening, at midnight, at cockcrow or in the morning,' he must always find me waiting." Locked hands and a rapt expression clinched the argument, and subsequent offers to manage the house-keeping or dig in the garden were received in an ungratefully lukewarm spirit by those to whom they were tendered.

On the evening of the day on which Miss Crisp had undertaken her daily less hopeful pilgrimage, Susannah—whether owing to some slackness of work, or more probably, since the Y.M.C.A. were never slack, to having found a temporary substitute for herself, returned home earlier than usual, and leaving her bicycle in the garage walked hurriedly to the front door, chiding herself for her futile haste and repeating, with that odd superstition which makes one faintly hope to capture good news, by asserting one's conviction of bad, that of course she would be met by the usual headshake, with which her old friend was wont to shorten her suspense. But would that old friend be in such haste to convey ill or no tidings as to be standing in evening dress outside the open hall door, looking eagerly out, evidently in impatient expectation of some one or something? That that someone was herself Susannah could not doubt, and as she realised the figure standing out against the lit hall behind, her heart stood suddenly still at the knowledge that to-night she would not be met by that blank sign of negation, for which every recurring night she tried, and every night unsuccessfully, to brace

herself to meet. To-night something good or bad had happened. Something ? But *what* ?

In another minute Judith had caught sight of, and fled to meet the new-comer, and, flinging both arms round her, with a violence which she would have reprobated in Parthenope, panted out, "I told you, didn't I tell you ? that it would all come right ?"

A slice of moonlight gave a shine to the damp ground on which they were standing, and ghostily showed that the girl's blanched lips were moving, though they brought out no sound. The senior's were rebellious too, but she compelled them to reassuring, if shaky, utterance. "Alive ? I should think he was alive !" Then, as the meaning of her words seemed hardly to reach the dazed intelligence to which they were addressed she raised and steadied her voice with a great effort. "Don't you understand what I am saying, child ? He is *alive*, as much alive as you or I. A good deal more alive than at my age I can pretend to be." She laughed unsteadily, adding in a quasi-scolding key, "Now don't faint, or do anything silly just when I'm telling you the news best worth hearing that you ever had in your life."

The quivering form, still held in the elder woman's close, pressing embrace, stirred a little as if to free itself, a movement understood and sympathised with, though but partially consented to by the elder. "I am holding you only because I am afraid that you will tumble down if I don't," she explained with a badly feigned gruffness. The words had a galvanic effect upon their object.

"I am not thinking of tumbling down," Susannah cried, suddenly recovering her voice, and pulling herself apart with something of the independence and touch-me-notishness of her old self, "but I cannot believe what you say. I hear all right, but I cannot take it in. Are you sure that you are not mistaken ? Is he really alive ? How badly is he hurt ? Will he get well ? Have they found out where he is ? Are they going to bring him home ?" As if to make up for her first speechlessness the string of questions

poured out in a torrent flood, and at the end of them, their utterer seized her companion's arm and shook it. "Oh, how slow you are! For God's sake, make haste to answer me."

"Yes! Yes! YES! YES!" cried the person thus adjured, beginning to laugh hysterically. "Yes to everything. Come indoors and you shall hear everything."

CHAPTER LXVII

THE Camerons had not gone to bed—in point of fact it was scarcely ten o'clock. It is true that in consideration of the early hour at which they were to set off to London the next morning, and the shattering emotions of the day, Sir Edward had been employing the tender coaxing with which he sometimes—not by any means always—vanquished his wife's wilful resolves, to try and persuade her to fortify herself by rest for the morrow's ordeal. Milady's reply was to the effect that she never meant to go to bed again as long as she lived ! This eminently rational determination was proclaimed with such a fixity of resolution, that the gentle Sir Edward could only acquiesce in it, comforting himself inwardly with the difficulty of carrying out such a programme.

Since her long-incredulous ears had received the tidings that he "who was dead"—or as good as dead, "was alive again," that he "that was lost had been found," not only found, but authentically in Red Cross keeping at Calais, and to be brought over to a London Hospital on the very morrow—that within twenty-four hours she would be embracing him, Milady could scarcely be said to have sat down. It is true that to be persistently on her legs would not really advance the hour of her setting forth towards that still nearly incredible reunion, yet it seemed to do so. Although aware that her son's condition was not such as to render his speedy removal to his home either probable or even possible, yet in the hours since the arrival of the news of his being alive, she had made every most minute arrangement for his reception, which would have been necessary and fitting had he been expected within the next five minutes. It was absurd, but it got through some of

the time, and perhaps helped to preserve a sanity that seemed rocking under the shock of too tremendous a joy.

She was now apparently purposelessly pulling out drawers, and opening receptacles of various kinds, though what she was searching for in them was unknown even to herself. "We must keep him amused," she was saying, talking on rapidly with low-voiced excitement, "quietly amused, of course. We must have all sorts of games for him—quiet games that will occupy him, but not try his poor head too much. We——" she broke off dead short. "What was that?"

"The front door bell? A telegraph boy—oh, God forbid." She rushed towards the door, but was intercepted by her General.

"Stop," he said, with mild but decisive authoritative-ness, "don't be frightened. It's nothing."

Yet the precipitation of his own movements showed that he shared his wife's alarm. That wife paused in somewhat unwonted obedience, but her legs seemed giving way under her, on the threshold.

The next thing of which she was conscious was a female figure flying past Sir Edward to throw its arms round her own neck, and a voice—the voice of Susannah Henley sobbing out, "Oh! I know that it is late, but I *had* to come! I could not help it!"

For a moment Lady Cameron accepted the embrace, then freeing herself—it was not difficult, for poor Susannah had at once realised her mistake,—she sank in a chair, clasping both hands over a heart which seemed literally jumping out of her body, and gasped out, "You frightened me. I thought—I——" she stopped, apparently quite knocked out of time; yet through the whirlpool of her mind there darted even now the thought, "Why need she have come? She evidently already looks upon herself as one of the family."

Across the rapture of illumination that lit the intruder's face, a slight cloud passed at this pungent snub. (She was

so little used to offer endearments, and so absolutely ignorant of the experience of having them repulsed), but it was only for a second.

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried, her whole face one lovely radiance. "I ought to have thought—but I had only one idea! Oh! I *am* so glad! So glad!"

"You acted like the dear kind friend you are," put in the General, in his delightful voice, which, when addressing a woman, always had something of a caress in it, while he cast a lenient yet definitely reproachful glance towards his wife.

"God bless you for it, dear! Milady is a bit upset, but when she comes round she'll tell you the same thing." There was the smallest grain of command in the appeal, and the person to whom it was addressed recognised the fact. She put out her left hand, it gave her a senseless comfort to offer only her second best one, to the girl, and murmured, "Yes, it was kind! Thank you!"

It was perhaps because he found his consort's amende inadequate that an added warmth came into the husband's voice, as, with a hand affectionately resting on Susannah's shoulder, he resumed his exegesis of the situation. "I have been scolding her," he began, in a most unscolding key, "telling her that she is not to pitch her expectations too high, else she will be disappointed. She must not expect the boy to come bounding out of the hospital train as soon as it draws up at Victoria. When you have been knocked silly by being hit on the head with shrapnel, have been perforce left out for four-and-twenty hours, and lain unconscious for a fortnight in a hospital, there is not much bound in you." As he went on, with the sense of the girl's great eyes riveted on him in speechless interest, terror and joy, a distinct feeling of enjoyment, and a momentary forgetfulness of Milady invaded the good General's being. "I need not go through the whole yarn, need I?" he pursued. "Stop me if you have heard it before. I told it all to Judith" (scrupulously polite as Sir Edward always was, in his blissful excitement, he here lapsed into an

unwonted Christian name). "Good old soul! She looked so pleased that I hoped she was going to kiss me, but she thought better of it!" He broke into a happy laugh, and Susannah found tremulous speech to answer him.

"I came away in such a hurry that I had not time to hear details."

"How dear of you!" rejoined he gratefully. "Well, you must know that as soon as they were able to get him in they took him straight from the trenches to the hospital at Béthune, and there he lay, as I told you, till he came to himself, and then they got him into a barge and took him all the way by canal to Calais and put him into a Red Cross hospital there, and to-morrow, please God, we shall have him at home in England again." There was a lilt of quite boyish gaiety in the elderly voice, and with the one of his hands that was not resting in quasi-fatherly caress on her shoulder he gave a glad squeeze to as many of her fingers as he could possess himself of. They warmly returned his pressure, and though she could not for the moment speak, she lifted her chin and her whole lovely face towards him, while out of the wonderful blue eyes to which love and suffering had lent so much deeper and higher a beauty than they had ever before owned welled great happy tears, which took their way unchecked down her thinned cheeks. Deeply touched, and with his habitual tact, wanting to give her time to recover herself, the General ran glibly on. "I know what you are going to ask me—why we did not get earlier news of him? Well, there is a bit of a muddle about that which is not quite cleared up yet. His Colonel was killed by a shell that knocked over a whole lot of the other poor fellows, and there was a confusion with another Cameron, and altogether—but, bless your heart," his tone was rising into almost a shout of triumph, "what does that matter now? Now that we have got him back, or please God shall have, before this time to-morrow!" . . .

A quarter of an hour later, Susannah having announced her intention to depart, and Sir Edward having left the

room to see after her bicycle, the two women were left facing each other.

Now that her visitor was on the edge of departure, Milady was able to put on a simulacrum of cordiality. "It *was* very kind of you to come, and I am afraid that I hear rain. I hope that you won't get wet!"

The person addressed showed no symptom of repeating the misplaced endearments of her arrival. She stood before Jack's mother, with her arms hanging by her sides, and said in a trembling half-whisper, "You will tell him—tell him——"

But at sight of that embodied pleading grace, that spiritualised tender beauty, Milady's brief impulse towards a kinder attitude froze up. "He will be more besotted about her than ever," was her bitter jealous thought, and she answered coldly, "I am afraid that I cannot engage to give any messages until I find out how much his head can stand. You must remember that he has had concussion of the brain."

CHAPTER LXVIII

"It is the most appalling thing I ever heard of!" Laura Steele said. She was the only one of her family capable of speech, and even with her it was a poor and difficult feat. They were all crying, except the father, and it was not altogether certain that behind the sheets of the "Herald," the local paper, the eyes with which he was reading the details of the catastrophe alluded to, were not clouded. The almost invariable Steele comment on any misfortune that it was "Kismet" or "Just their luck," was left unemployed in this case, for it was not upon them or anyone related to them that the calamity in question had fallen. Yet it was evidently one that sensibly affected a family not very susceptible of violent emotions. Even the lymphatic Rosamund was sitting quite upright, and weeping almost loudly.

"Oh, if it *must* have happened," pursued Laura, between little sobbing gasps, "why couldn't it have happened to—somebody else?"

Though no name was mentioned none of the hearers were in doubt as to whom this humane aspiration referred, yet none of them expressed the faintest disapprobation. "But poor Susannah!" The pitying ejaculation brought Miss Steele's oratory to a standstill, and for a few moments there was no sound, but of swift-caught breaths and a rustled newspaper.

Presently the second daughter lifted up a muffled voice.

"I suppose that she was returning from the Y.M.C.A. I know that she always bicycles back however late it is."

Mrs. Steele's voice was never a powerful organ, but it

beat any of its former records for broken-hearted smallness, as she sighed out—

“I always thought it was very dangerous coming back at eleven o'clock at night, and almost always alone. I should have said so to Mrs. Henley and Miss Crisp, only that it was no business of mine.”

There was another silence save for sniffs and pocket-handkerchiefs, and then Laura spoke in a thick voice and addressing Mr. Steele. “Father, would you mind reading aloud the account in the paper. I am not quite clear now how it happened.”

Mr. Steele was always a civil parent, and ready to grant his offspring any reasonable request, though he might season the concession with the cayenne pepper of a little sarcasm, but there could be no doubt as to his unwillingness to consent to the request thus made by his youngest daughter. There was a perceptible interval before he answered reluctantly, “Certainly, if you wish it,” and as if in haste to get over a distasteful task, of his ability to perform which creditably he was in doubt, he began at once to read rapidly in a low, uncertain voice. “An extraordinary accident, attended by disastrous results, occurred in East Street late last night, just outside the Cottage Hospital, as the result of a bicycle and its lady rider falling into a trench in the road. The — Gas and Electricity Co. are engaged in laying a new Main along the street, and the trench in connection therewith was being cut, under a contract by Mr. William Norris of Hale. The trench is on the right side going to Aldershot. Last night at about 11.15 Miss Susannah Henley, daughter of a much respected inhabitant of —, Mrs. Henley of Grays, was returning from the neighbourhood of Aldershot, and upon reaching the barrier at the end of the trench— heavy rain was falling at the time—the bicycle appears to have skidded and collided with the barrier, with the result that it and its rider were precipitated into the trench. The unfortunate young lady was flung with terrific violence against the Gas Main. The matron of the Cottage Hospital

witnessed the accident. Assistance was at once summoned, and Miss Henley was rescued from the trench, but not before she had received terrible injuries to her head and face. She was conveyed in an unconscious state to the Hospital, where she now lies. It is much feared that her injuries will prove fatal. . . .”

“Oh, how thankful I am to be here, to be a help and comfort to you! It almost consoles me for not being with Him,” sobbed Parthenope upon her aunt’s shoulder at about the same time, in the house over the way. That aunt who seemed made entirely of stone yet moved about with steady steps and spoke rationally, was at Grays for only the few minutes necessary to give some directions to the servants, and make indispensable arrangements before returning to the Hospital where she and Mrs. Henley had spent the night, and where, in view of the desperate condition of the sufferer, they would be allowed to spend the whole of the day and of as many more days and nights as the flicker of life still burnt in the wrecked form beside which they had watched.

“There will be sure to be any number of enquiries, here to-day,” pursued Mrs. Willy Steele, “I will see them all—you may depend upon me, however painful it may be to me. Poor darling Sue! She was so popular!” The speaker loosened her hold upon her aunt in order to get a firmer grip of her pocket-handkerchief, and Miss Crisp gave a sort of writhe.

Perfectly unconscious of the stab that her use of the past tense in her testimony to Susannah’s popularity had inflicted, the young comforter flowed on. “By what train did you say that the great man is to arrive? Oh, no, by the by, you did not mention it. Oh, how will you and her mother bear the suspense till he comes—till he tells you for how long it is likely to last? I suppose that even he won’t be able to say positively at once. But oh!” clasping her little thin hands prayerfully, “if she is to suffer terribly I do *hope* it won’t be long.”

Before her sentence was quite finished, to the surprise

of the Paraclete, her hearer had run—positively *run*—out of the room. . . .

A week had passed. The news of the accident to one of its most popular members had been noised abroad among the soldierly society whose villas clustered above the scattered Surrey town lying beneath them. Parthenope was as good as her word, in imparting to the really shocked and concerned enquirers the dismal daily bulletin. It is true that it was fastened upon the hall door, but to one so steeped in habitual sorrow as Mrs. Willy Steele, there was a melancholy pleasure in repeating its brief statements, and enlarging on its meagre details, to a continuous stream of eager listeners, who on their homeward way mingled their distressed comments on the news imparted by the touching, slender, black-robed figure, with somewhat remorseful remarks as to how little justice they had done to its owner in her maiden days, how much she had come out since her troubles, and how richly a husband who could brutally desert so much virtue and tenderness deserved to be kicked downstairs.

“Yes, there really is a faint gleam of hope to-day,” she had said when, after seven days’ lapse, the victim of the disaster had shown some slight signs of returning consciousness, imparting the intelligence to a kind-hearted Colonel’s wife and a couple of young daughters whose awkward worship of her, Susannah had been wont to reward with friendly greetings and little thoughtful acts of kindness. “One hardly dares say so, but they think that she recognised Aunt Judith—just for a moment. They are not *sure*, but they think so! Yes, there is for the first time just a gleam of hope that her life may be spared, but——” as her companions broke out into exclamations of joy, she added with a wan smile, “the question is whether, poor soul, she will think life worth having, under the conditions which are the only ones she can henceforth hold it on.” The visitors’ countenances fell.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” replied Parthenope, wiping eyes in which

the water stood, "I can hardly bear to say so, but if she does pull through, she will be hopelessly disfigured *for life!*"

The girls gave a simultaneous cry, "Oh, *don't* say so! Oh, how dreadful!"

CHAPTER LXIX

LADY CAMERON was in a sitting-room of the London Hotel in which, as being nearest to the Hospital for Officers to which her son had been conveyed, she and Sir Edward had taken rooms. Her eyes were uplifted to those of her husband who was standing before her, and to whom she was listening with an expression of shocked and pained absorption. Yet below the shock and the pain, was discernible a measureless ocean of content, for within half a quarter of a mile of her was not Jack lying in luxurious comfort, tended by all that was most first-rate among doctors and nurses, and with now very moderate suffering minimised by every appliance known to science. It is true that he was as weak as an infant, that his head was still too feeble to bear much conversation, and that any topic capable of producing the smallest excitement was tabooed. Yet had he not been able to whisper to her his love and joy in her presence, and to receive her trembling kiss, cautiously laid on an unbandaged bit of his forehead ? There was an enquiry too which his pale lips had framed, but that she had pretended not to hear and now tried to forget.

It was not of his son of whom Sir Edward was talking, nor was it his condition—now so hopeful—that had drawn such melancholy lines about his mouth. “Yes,” he was saying as he divested himself of the fur motoring coat in which he had just driven up from Aldershot, “to-day there is really a definite improvement. She has been conscious for a longer time than ever before since the— the accident. Fripp came down again yesterday, and spoke almost confidently of being able ultimately to pull her through.”

"I am so glad," returned his wife heartily, "but if the news is so good why do you look sad?"

"Because," he said, "I learnt to-day that if she lives, she will be—must always be—disfigured past recognition."

Milady gave a little gasp.

"Good God! Did they tell you so?—I mean did Mrs. Henley and Judith say so?"

He shook his head. "No. I saw them for only a moment. Poor souls! They could scarcely speak about it. I cannot tell you how shocked I was at their appearance. Upon my soul, I don't think I should have known Mrs. Henley, she looks twenty years older." He paused, his speech arrested by the flood of his compassion.

His wife made a little gesture of pity, and said thoughtfully, "She was always so *inordinately* proud of Susannah's good looks."

The disparaging adverb jarred upon him, but he made no comment.

Lady Cameron almost immediately added a question. "How did you hear then? Who told you?"

"That little Mrs. Willy Steele. She happened to be down at the hospital and came to speak to me. The doctor—their own, not Fripp—had told her. Poor little woman! She cried so much that I could hardly understand what she said." Again the speaker paused, for the same reason as before, but presently added, "She made the same sort of remark as you did about Mrs. Henley's extravagant pride in her daughter's beauty. I could not help thinking," he continued slowly, "that under the circumstances it would have been better taste to have left *that* out." Then afraid of having been uncharitable, he ended up with, "But in point of fact she was so much agitated, that I think she scarcely knew what she was saying."

Milady hung her head. It was not much in her character to accept a snub, however oblique a one, with meekness, but in the present case she probably took the reproof lying down, because conscious in the deepest recesses of her

breast of having harboured, though only for a moment, a thought far blacker than the one which had evoked her husband's just and gentle rebuke. The idea—evil and cruel as an idea could be—had darted like a flash of light across her mind, "If she is to be so hideously disfigured, Jack cannot go on caring for her in the same mad way." To do Milady justice she thrust the suggestion from her with horrified remorse, but she did not and could not feel any certainty that it would not return. So she rejoined mildly and with an accent of unmistakable feeling in her voice, "It is too horrible! And she *was* so extraordinarily handsome!"

There was a silence, the woman fending off with both hands as it were the devilish temptation to be glad which still hovered so near her, and the man recalling against his will the numberless holdcheap criticisms made by his mate upon the now so easily vaunted, because departed, loveliness.

Lady Cameron was the first to speak again. "It is wonderful what surgical science can do nowadays," she said, with an effort to give a rather less overwhelming aspect to the catastrophe, "one is hearing daily nowadays of the extraordinary feats of actual reconstruction that are accomplished in the cases of soldiers whose faces have been almost shot away."

There was not much of the General's constitutional optimism in the key in which he answered, "Yes, that is true, and later when she is better able to bear it, something of the kind is to be attempted, but—it was an appalling smash! The jaw broken, nose shattered——" he stopped for a minute or two unable to proceed. Then, conquering himself, went on, "mercifully her eyesight is saved, though she had a narrow escape of losing it. There was a frightful gash right through one of her eyebrows."

Milady had covered her face with her hands. She was handsome enough herself to feel poignantly what such a devastation must mean to a beautiful woman, and it caused her a species of terror to realise that she herself had

been within an ace of rejoicing at the hideous ruin which had overtaken a fellow creature, who had never intentionally injured her.

Sir Edward had sat down beside his wife. Her gesture of horror—the covering her face with her hands as if the recital of such ghastly details were more than she could bear, had quite effaced his slight sense of resentment against her, and it was with all his usual kindness that he laid his own hand on her sleeve and said half apologetically, “You will think me an ass, but what makes me feel more cut up than almost anything else is that we were indirectly the cause of it. If it had not been for her kind impatience to tell us how much she shared our joy,” once more he left a sentence unfinished, and once more Milady’s conscience gave her a sharp stab, as she recalled the unwelcoming coldness with which she had received the poor intruder, and her churlish inward cavil, as to the officious needlessness of her ill-timed visit! The remembrance was so unpleasant that she tried to chase it away—no easy task. And the small distance to which she had been able to remove it, was proved by the ejaculation which she presently sighed out, with her forehead pressed against her husband’s shoulder.

“Oh, Edward, how shall we tell him? How will he bear it?”

Milady’s General was never a person who went to meet misfortune, and apparently this aspect of the calamity had not yet presented itself to him, for a new wrinkle showed itself on his forehead, and there was a short delay before he could bring out, “Oh, but there can be no question of that yet!”

Lady Cameron lifted a very uncomfortable countenance from its resting-place. “Oh, but he won’t be put off for long. Already to-day he tried to question me about her, but I pretended not to hear.”

For a moment or two her hearer looked nonplussed, then with a clearing brow, “Didn’t somebody—some swell—say that one ought to take short views of life?”

His consort did not look much reassured. "I suppose that you mean the Bible, 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,' but I always thought it a precept very difficult to put in practice."

CHAPTER LXX

It is astonishing how soon the human mind can get used to ideas the most horrifying when first presented to it, and how few weeks it takes to set a neighbourhood on easy terms with any event, however calamitous, that does not directly affect each constituent part of that neighbourhood. This is particularly true in war-time, when tidings of catastrophes come as regularly as the baker, and over most hearts there grows a sort of hard skin, making them partially impervious to any but the sharpest and most personal darts. "To-day it is you! To-morrow it will be I! Why should I spend all my compassion on you when I shall so soon need it for myself?" was the unshaped thought.

How then could any disaster affecting only *one* person make a permanent impression upon those whose daily reading was of Titan battles, of devilish engines dealing death and ruin from the sea depths and the air heights, of trampled nationalities and monstrous cruelties?

Perhaps in days of piping peace, Susannah Henley's little world would have been able and willing to bewail her Fate more leisurely. As it was, by the end of February she was almost extinct as a topic. This was the less surprising because she had not been among them to stimulate their sympathy. What the eye does not see, the heart does not feel, and no one had seen Susannah.

As soon as it was possible, and that was sooner than had been anticipated, she had been transferred in a motor ambulance to a Convalescent Hospital on the South Coast, and since then but few tidings had reached acquaintances still kindly interested in her, when they had leisure from their own anxieties to think about her. Parthenope, who

had been so active and invaluable as a purveyor of news in the early days, was no longer available, as she had departed with the rest of the family. Neither Mrs. Henley nor Miss Crisp had wished it, but they were both too broken to oppose any resistance to her tearful asseverations that whatever it might cost her to place so many additional miles between herself and Willy, nothing would induce her to leave them when she felt she "must be so essential to their comfort, now that dearest Sue would in all probability never again be anything but a hopeless invalid." Both women winced under the stab so unconsciously dealt them, but they bowed to their young devotees' reasoning.

And now it was April, and the return to Grays, often deferred, could no longer be put off. Susannah had recovered her health. The Hospital had dismissed her some weeks ago, and other tenants were waiting to occupy the small cottage in a quiet village on the Devonshire coast, to which the inevitable shrinking from the equally inevitable return home had made the little party retreat.

The routine of life had to be resumed some time or other; the kindly inquisitiveness of acquaintances had to be faced. Why not now? It was Susannah herself who put that question one day to her shrinking elders, put it in a steady voice.

"It must be faced," she said, with a ring of resolute cheerfulness in her voice, "and it will soon be over. After just the first, people will get used to me. I am getting used to myself!"

Neither of the elder women could for the moment play up, but Parthenope stretched out an appreciative little claw, and said affectionately, "Dear Sue! How plucky you are! And I will help you. I will ask them quietly not to stare at you."

The brave and once beautiful creature to whom this *chef d'œuvre* of consolation was addressed gave an almost imperceptible shiver, and turned her head a little aside. That head was no longer covered with rippled gold. Susannah's hair had all been cut off, and the infantile curls

that were now beginning to replace it were of a darker colour than the original yellow fleece.

When somewhat later Miss Henley was alone with Judith, she resolutely resumed the subject. "You dear old thing!" she said looking compassionately at the aged and grief-furrowed countenance of her old friend, "it is not unselfishness on my part, because I think it would be better for you and mother. I wish it for myself. We shall none of us be easy in our minds while it is hanging over us. I am sure that people will be kind and won't look at me more than they can help, even without Parthenope's request." She tried to manage a small laugh, but realising that it was not very successful, went on, "And I do want to get mother home. She is like a lost dog here. Poor mother! I am sure that her best chance of picking up her spirits lies in Jackson. There must be such arrears of crimes that he has committed during the last five months!" The laugh came genuinely now, and was even faintly echoed by Miss Crisp.

So a day very early in April found lit fires, drawn-up blinds and swept and garnished rooms in the long-closed and empty villa. . . . "Are you sure that it is safe? That it is not to-day that they are expected back?" Willy Steele had asked on the previous afternoon, peeping cautiously out of a window of the Bungalow, to which he was paying a flying visit in order to bid farewell to his family. He had run down several times during the winter for hurried week-ends, but the present hasty stay was of a different character.

"It seems rather a wild goose chase going to France when you haven't got any definite job there," his sister Laura had said in affectionate cavilling, when this project had been suddenly sprung upon the Steele family.

"Oh, I shall be sure to be able to pick up something," replied her brother with feverish tenacity of his idea. "My chief has promised to try and help me to some job in connection with Red Cross work, and Granger will be on the look-out for anything that may turn up in the way of

reporting for a newspaper or interpreting. One never knows what vacancies may occur. You remember Granger who worked so hard to get my rotten article into the 'Round Table,' and whom she insulted about it when we met him at dinner afterwards, and if the worst came to the worst I can enlist in the French Army. I am told that there are much more facilities for—for the disabled," he gave a cursory glance at his limping leg, "to get into it than with us."

His auditor did not look convinced. "I hoped," she said in a discontented key, "that you would be satisfied to stick to your 'Wounded and Missing' till the end of the War. You were so elated when you got the offer."

The interview was taking place in Willy's bed-sitting-room, the apartment whose view over the fir woods had often excited Laura's envy. She might now enter into almost immediate possession of it, but she did not look much uplifted by the prospect.

A change passed over Willy's face, a look of indescribable apprehension, and he lowered his voice, "As long as I am in England, I can never be safe from—Her."

His companion uttered an inarticulate sound expressive of disgust.

"What!" she cried indignantly and with an energy out of keeping with the languid tradition of her family, "isn't she content with having stripped you to the bone?"

He shook a dismal head. "She is determined to live with me again. She says she now sees it is her bounden duty to do so. That 'whom God hath joined together,' etc. I suppose it is quite true, and that there is no reason why we should not live together as man and wife—no reason except that I had *far*, *FAR* rather die!"

CHAPTER LXXI

"HE does not get on as fast as he ought!" Lady Cameron had said in a discouraged voice to her husband about three weeks after the return of her son. "Looking back, I cannot see much progress in the last ten days. The nurses are quite disappointed."

"Concussion is never a very quick business," replied Sir Edward, but he also looked rather cast down.

"Of course if his mind were at ease, he would have a much better chance," pursued Milady with a further access of depression, "but it never, never is! I don't think that there is a moment of the day or night when he is not thinking of her. I quite dread going to him. I am at my wits' end to know how to fence off his questions. He knows me so well that he can detect in a minute when I am telling him lies; and how *can* I tell him the truth?"

The only help the General could give her was a caress and a very feelingly uttered, "You poor darling!"

"How *can* I break to him," resumed she, working herself up to a further and further height of distress, "that she never henceforth can be anything but an object of pity and repulsion?"

"Oh, I hope it won't be quite as bad as that!" cried he, shocked and protesting. "The doctors seem to say that they hope to make a pretty good job of it—raising the bridge of the nose and that sort of thing, and when the wounds are healed they hope that the cicatrices won't be so *very* perceptible. Modern surgical science does work miracles."

His dismally cheerful forecast was stopped by a sigh as before his mind's eye rose the face his keen appreciation of

whose loveliness he had tried partially to suppress in deference to his Lady's annoyance.

"I know that you are keeping something from me," was the wounded man's greeting to his mother on her next visit. "It is no use your pretending that you are not!"

His sunken eyes, brighter than they ought to have been, held her with the wistful intensity of their asking. She hesitated. She knew that his temperature was up, and that excitement was above all things to be avoided for him. Once again she tried to parry. "What a boy you are for getting fancies into your silly head!" she said, with a little forced laugh. "Nurse Jennings says that I am only to stay ten minutes to-day, and that you are not to talk."

The sick man raised his head from the pillow, and in his faint voice there was a ring of command, "Is she *dead*? I won't let you go till you tell me whether she is *dead*."

"Dead!" repeated Milady, now thoroughly scared. "What nonsense you talk. She is as much alive as you or I."

The blue eyes full of pain and doubt seemed resolute to drag the truth from the most hidden recesses of her being, and she was thankful that she could meet them without flinching. A look of relief, but of relief adulterated by lingering suspicion passed over his pinched features. "Then write to her," he whispered, still with that accent of command, "ask her—if she happens to be in London—if it is quite convenient to her—to—come and see me. Tell her the visiting hours."

A slight shiver passed over the mother's whole body. In what a horrible cleft stick did this request—rather this command place her? Should she acquiesce? Obtain a momentary respite at the expense of inflicting a bitter subsequent disappointment on her boy? Or should she avail herself of this opening to begin the breaking process, which had been hanging over her for three weeks. She decided on the latter alternative.

"I am afraid," she answered, trembling so much that a fear that he must perceive her agitation added itself to her

other terrors, "that it would be no use my writing to-day. She is not likely to be in London just at present! She—she is obliged to—lie up for a little while. She has had a— a slight accident!" It was more by divination than actual hearing that the mother made out the questing that followed.

"Was it slight? Are you telling the truth? What was it?"

Abject fear of the harm her communication might be doing gave a sort of ghastly lightness to Lady Cameron's tones in reply.

"Oh, she just fell from her bicycle! It was at night. She was coming back from a late visit to us!—it was a— a— tiresome thing to happen, but she is getting better daily, *hourly!*"

His voice was still a mere whisper, but she heard him more distinctly, as he framed the words, "You don't look as if you were speaking truth. I had rather know! Is she going—to—die?"

The compelling anguish of his eyes was almost unendurable to her; and the factitious carelessness of her own answer would, as she miserably felt, not deceive him for a moment; but to tell him the worst, the true worst would surely kill him on the spot.

"*Die!*" she echoed, with an attempt at scorn of so preposterous a suggestion. "My darling, there is no question of dying. They are afraid that she may be slightly disfigured—for a while—that is all! She—she fell on her face! Oh, Nurse, Nurse Jennings! he has fainted."

CHAPTER LXXII

THAT was in November, and now it was April. The winter—a singularly unpleasant one as to weather conditions, with a spurious gentleness in the New Year's opening weeks, and a ferocious *volte face* in its later ones—was behind. At least so it was hoped, by those who did not realise how thoroughly disagreeable “spungy April” can make herself when she tries. But just two or three of her earlier days were worthy of her name; and on one of these, there was a deep stir of agitation in the bosoms of those who inhabited a couple of houses in the vicinage of a great camp. The afternoon was young; and the motor, ordered for 2.30, had not yet come round; though the continual consultation of his watch by the expecting occupant showed that for him, the moments lagged until it did so.

“Are you quite sure that you can bear it?” his mother was asking Jack Cameron for the twentieth time.

His eye was fixed in a frenzy of impatience on the turn in the drive where the motor would first be visible approaching from the garage, but he answered with gentle steadiness, the more convincing from its absence of emphasis, “Quite sure.”

“As I told you, there is nothing dreadful, nothing even very painful to be seen now!” continued Milady, with an evident wish to be encouraging, but an equally evident doubt as to the real preparedness of her son, for the new Susannah to whom he was in as feverish a haste to fly as he had ever been to the old one. “People tell me, that they are almost sure that they would have recognised her. It is only that that lovely complexion of hers is gone, and—and the features I am afraid permanently thickened! Darling!” putting her two hands fondly on the lapels of

his coat—he was in mufti—"I am afraid that you must prepare yourself to see a—plain woman!"

He took her gently by the wrist which he kissed, but as he pronounced after her the doleful words, "A plain woman!" his eyes were full of a sort of triumph. "Yes, she will believe me now! She never would before!"

His mother gazed after the retreating car for as long as it was in sight; the car that held the Treasure retrieved from Death; but which in only two days she was to yield up a third time to the embrace of the War Monster who had twice so nearly bereft her of him. Jack's recovery had been slow, with many relapses, and disheartening throw-backs. But now he was really cured, and fit to return to the Front. He was quite willing to go; but there was one thing that he must do before he went. He was on his way to do it to-day. Poor Milady! Her worst enemy could not deny that she had struggled hard against the truly devilish temptation towards gladness which had beset her on first hearing of Susannah's probable life disfigurement. Yet a tiny remnant of it still lurked in the darkest corner of her heart. It took the shape of the reflection, "It is all very fine his supposing that it won't make any difference to his feelings, *but wait till he sees her!*" Milady went indoors rather cheered. . . .

"Shall I see him first and prepare him a little?" Parthenope had asked Susannah at about the same time; an expression of condolence spreading over her bleak little face.

The person addressed gave one of the wincings with which those on whom Mrs. Willy Steele practised her methods of consolation were not unfamiliar.

"He knows!" she answered briefly.

"Oh, I *am* sorry for you," continued Parthenope, with a *cri du cœur*. "What an ordeal! if I were you I should put on a veil and keep it down at first! and yet perhaps," with a change to her exalted vein, "it is the best thing that could happen to you! Now at last you will know whether his Love is really genuine or only a counterfeit!"

Such a touchstone !” she broke off in mid sentence for Susannah had left the room. Miss Henley went in search of Judith, whom she had often found a valuable antidote against “The Angel in the House.”

Distress and agitation were painted on her poor wrecked countenance. “Parthenope thinks that I had better keep a veil down ! What do you say ?”

If Miss Crisp had responded truly, her response would have been “Parthenope be d——d !” but all that came audibly through her lips was a dubious and not upsettingly sympathetic, “Well, it is just as you feel !”

They were in Judith’s bedroom ; and after a moment’s hesitation, Susannah walked resolutely to the looking-glass, which being in the window was receiving the full brunt of the hard spring light, and steadily regarded her own image.

“No !” she said, “I will wear no veil ! He shall know the worst at once ! the *worst* ! Oh, Judith, it is pretty bad !” Then resolutely swallowing down a dry sob that was rising in her throat, she added with a painful self-derision, “but I must not break down ! That will only make me handsomer than ever !” . . .

It was in the schoolroom where he had so often courted her in vain that Jack met Susannah. The blinds were ruthlessly drawn up to the top. She wore neither hat nor veil ; and determinedly faced the full glare of the light. As he rushed—or so it seemed to her—towards her, a wave of despair washed over her hard-trying spirit. How noble he looked, how eager, how fond ! In a second what a terrible, terrible change she would see pass over his face. No ! she could *not* see it. It must come ! but she *would* not see it ! Her hands flew up to her face, and the next moment she was conscious of two other hands drawing them down in passionate haste ; and a moment later still, a voice about the triumphant gladness in whose tone there could be no mistake crying out almost loudly, “My Own, *at last* you believe me !”

They were the same words which he had employed in his Profession of Faith to his mother an hour ago. But

Jack was never a "chief speaker." As they stood in the trance of that endless first embrace—Susannah's unspeakable happiness enhanced by the thought that she was too close to him for him to see her! a sound came wafted through the open casement, "Jackson, you are the greatest ass that God ever put breath into."

"Yes, miss."

It was months since that fragment of dialogue had been given to the breeze, and both hearers laughed.

FINIS

